CONSTRUCTING CONTEMPORARY CUBAN FEMALE IDENTITY:

FEMALE TRACES IN THE VISUAL ARTS.

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Abstract

This study will assess five contemporary female artists to explore ways in which their art production can be meaningfully read in relation to their sense of being Cuban and what this might mean for them at this juncture in Cuba's history. The first three chapters introduce the artists — María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Marta María Pérez, Belkis Ayón, Tania Bruguera and Sandra Ramos — and the unique Cuban visual arts spectrum post–1980, vis-à-vis movements, people, ideology, education and the impact of socialist influences. Key factors regarding Cuban identity will also be examined: gender, race, socio-cultural and religious practices, as these elements have been fundamental to the self-conscious identity constructions of these women through their art. As products of the revolutionary process, artists have delivered sophisticated avant-garde high art creations that embody the worldviews of the Cuban people. And, as professional artists, they are afforded specific ideological, ethical and social responsibilities and privileges within Cuban society. Their creative endeavours have become much-needed critical spaces to comment when other Cubans cannot and to consider issues of specific relevance to their country.

Drawing on the resources of iconography and various semiotic devices, the following three chapters focus on these women's lives and artistic trajectories via the topics they address, such as myth, religion, displacement and the Cuban Diaspora. As a recurrent element in their work and one historically connected to the Cuban visual arts tradition and notions of identity, their portrayals of the female body will be read as sites for socio-cultural, personal and ideological discourse within the parameters of the contemporary socialist Cuban framework. Also, the nature of the plastic arts medium and the

possibilities inherent in being a Cuban artist will be examined, and the other 'bodies' present in their work: the body of the audience and the body of the artwork.

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Introduction

This thesis examines a selection of works by Cuban female plastic artists: María Magdalena Campos-Pons, Marta María Pérez, Belkis Ayón, Tania Bruguera and Sandra Ramos. My paper concentrates specifically on these contemporary artists from the 1980s and 1990s art generations and analyses their lives and works in-depth. It seeks to understand how their art production can be meaningfully read in relation to their notions of 'Cubanness' and what that might mean for them at this particular juncture in Cuba's history. In other words, how their art can assert and articulate the contingencies of their individual identities and life experiences.

The general lack of research in the field of contemporary Cuban art has led me to restrict this study to a selection of contemporary female artists. This is a subject not well serviced by existing publications with very few published studies on this topic, and to date no study has concentrated solely and in-depth on contemporary Cuban female artists. This field deserves more intellectual research and I aim to contribute toward this end. My main contribution to the study of contemporary Cuban art practice has been the original field research I initially carried out for my undergraduate studies and have continued with over the last ten years. In the course of this research I travelled to Cuba, Mexico and the U.S. on a number of occasions to conduct interviews with many individuals.

The interviews undertaken for this thesis with artists and art specialists took the form of taped formal sessions with set questions as well as informal taped discussions and email communications leading on from formal interviews. The discussions/interviews

are listed in the "Sources Consulted" section of this thesis. All communications, formal and informal, were carried out in English, aside from those conducted with Marta María Pérez in Cuba, Mexico and by email, when the questions were posed in English but the artist replied in Spanish. The taped conversations with Pérez were translated with the aid of a Spanish translator and my supervisor Dr. Tania Tribe. However, the Spanish references for the Pérez taped interviews are not included in the text as only the English translations now remain. The only artist with whom I did not carry out formal interviews was Belkis Ayón. We were scheduled to do so but she committed suicide before any were able to take place. I have relied instead upon other scholars' documented formal interview sessions (in Spanish) with her, as well as her written documents — some in English, others in Spanish — which are also set out in "Sources Consulted". Unless otherwise stated I have translated all Spanish texts used in this paper.

The lack of published information available in the UK on this under-researched field led me overseas to conduct archival work in New York at the Center for Cuban Studies and the Museo del Barrio. Resource centres in Cuba have also been invaluable for gathering information that is not available elsewhere. In particular, the archival resources at the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales and the Centro de Arte de Wifredo Lam in Havana were very useful. I also managed to obtain a number of publications in Cuba, Mexico and the U.S. that are not available in the UK. These include a number of excellent articles published in certain art magazines as well as essays in specific exhibition catalogues. These are not widely known about or listed in any general referencing system and the exhibition catalogues in particular are difficult to obtain. I managed to obtain such articles and essays directly from the artists and intellectuals I interviewed and also from research centres in Cuba and the U.S..

As previously mentioned, there are very few published works and the scholarship in the field of the Cuban contemporary plastic arts is very limited. In addition to the articles and essays listed above, the available literature comprises in the main of the following: Luis Camnitzer *New Art of Cuba* (1994); David Craven *Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910–1990* (2002); Holly Block (ed.) *ART CUBA — The New Generation* (2001); Arturo Lindsay (ed.) *Santería Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art* (1996); Marilyn Zeitlin, Gerardo Mosquera et al (eds.) *Contemporary Art from Cuba: Irony & Survival on the Utopian Island* (1999).

Camnitzer's comprehensive survey of the Cuban plastic arts spectrum post–1959 proved to be essential to my understanding of art developments in contemporary Cuba and has been a consistently useful source for my studies and research. Camnitzer focuses on Cuban art developments, education and movements in the post–1959 era, specifically since 1980. Four out of the five artists in this thesis are included in Camnitzer's work, albeit very briefly, as his was intended as a general study to provide an overview of the Cuban plastic arts field. Moreover, the discussion is very brief about artists who graduated and rose to prominence in the 1990s. David Craven's research has proved to be enormously beneficial for this study, even though only one third of his book actually deals with Cuba as he examines the development of socialist artistic and cultural projects within three different Latin American revolutions (Cuba, Mexico and Nicaragua). However, Craven's book is unique as it examines the impact of Cuba's specific socialist trajectory vis-à-vis the plastic arts, which is an under-researched topic and a good grounding for my own investigations. This work briefly surveys and analyses art production in Cuba since the advent of the Revolution, focusing on poster art in the

1960s through to 1980s developments, which has built upon my existing knowledge of that era.

The work edited by Lindsay focuses on Afro-Cuban and Afro-Brazilian religious traditions and how they became an important aesthetic in Latin American art. Lindsay's book provides a general account of African and Afro-American traditions and beliefs, and it examines the work of a number of contemporary Latino artists with one chapter dedicated to Cuban contemporary visual artistic practice. In this chapter are two small sections (each less than one page) about two of the artists in my study. The book edited by Marilyn Zeitlin, Gerardo Mosquera and Antonio Eligio Fernández (Tonel) follows on from the art exhibition at the Arizona State Art museum in 1998. The exhibition and book is based upon the work of seventeen contemporary artists working in the 1990s, including two that I have chosen to examine in this thesis. The number of artists included in their study is substantial and consequently the discussion is general, divided into short essays on specific artists and separate topics with no discussion of 1980s artists and developments. Similarly, Holly Block's tome focuses on over sixty contemporary artists' work since the mid-1990s. It includes four short essays by Cuban art critics, artists' biographies, over one hundred colour plates and selected chronology and exhibition history post–1959. Three of the five artists in this present study are included in Block's book, although due to the scope of her project that book does not focus on any one artist's work in detail.

All the sources discussed above have been useful and relevant to my own study but mine goes beyond their respective scopes. In order to analyse these artists' lives and works I conducted interviews with key figures within the contemporary Cuban art system,

whom have firsthand experience of the momentous art developments that have taken place since the early 1980s. These include many foremost Cuban art intellectuals and specialists who also contributed to the works discussed above — Gerardo Mosquera, Tonel and Eugenio Valdés Figueroa. My study also focuses on the unique socialist trajectory of contemporary Cuban art production and the role of artists within society, as well as the Afro-Cuban socio-historical and cultural context and its relevance to these artists' sense of identity and art production.

Before proceeding it is necessary to set out my understanding of the philosophical research of phenomenologist Martín Heidegger (1889–1976), as his ideas have led to the development of a general concept of "being" that has facilitated my understanding of these women's artwork and notions of identity. In basic terms, Heidegger developed ideas about what it means to exist and he attempted to situate humans in this world and the very fact that we exist and dwell in particular places, spaces, cultures and times. His starting point was the concept of *Dasein,* characterised as "being there — in the world".[1] An Heideggerian argument holds that identity and meaning are relational constructions that emerge through the process of human being-in-the-world and that every aspect of ourselves is affected by where, how and when we exist and dwell. The experiential dimension of these ideas seem particularly poignant in light of the unique nature of Cuban society and the country's recent history, particularly with regard to the ever-increasing Diaspora and displacement of Cubans out of Cuba.

[1] Martín Heidegger, *Existence and Being*, (London: Vision Press, 1949), 27. Heidegger's notoriously complex work was devoted to producing an analysis of the existentialistic structure of human *Dasein*. See also *Basic Concepts*, trans. Gary E Aylesworth, (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993).

Leading on from Heidegger, the phenomenological ideas of Maurice Merleau-Ponty (1908-61) about the body also have validity for exploring these artists' corpuses, as all of them have utilised their own bodies or its image in their work. Merleau-Ponty's research concentrated specifically on the nature of our perception of our bodies and the place of our bodies in perceiving other things. He considered perception by means of the body as an active, living synthesis of movement and awareness of space, to explore the way in which our experience forms a way of being-in-the-world.[2] These ideas are particularly relevant and informative for many of the visual examples to be discussed in detail in this thesis, works such as Bruguera's *El Peso de Culpa* (Figure.69) and Campos-Pons' *History* series (Figures.40–42) for example.

My approach in this study is multi-disciplinary and the choice of methodologies has arisen out of my engagement with the artists, as well as with intellectuals, the research material and my general experiences in Cuba. There is no simplistic way of dealing with the issues involved without reducing the complexities of the works and the Cuban situation. Art must be seen in the larger socio-cultural context and within the dynamic of the temporal, political, economic, artistic and ideological situation. The ideas about interpretation in the visual art field developed by Paul Ricoeur and Hans Georg Gadamer have relevance to this study. These authors stressed the textual plurivocity of complex works of discourse and they also advocated that any interpretation is a phenomenon inseparable from a grasp of cultural context and historical situatedness, as the beliefs artists hold affect their sense of tradition and the goals, questions and answers they pursue.[3]

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[2] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception,* trans. Colin Smith, (London: Routledge, 1989), Part 1.
[3] See Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning*, (Forth Worth, TX: Texas Christian University Press, 1976) ; idem, *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) ; Gadamer.

The discourse of postmodernism has made possible a general recognition of where identity was always at: that "identity is something defined in relation to a whole set of other narratives, narratives of history and of cultures".[4] Identity also relates to one's individual life trajectory; where one was born and grew up; one's lived experiences; educational, social, religious and national concerns. Thus identity is not fixed nor is it one thing, but it can be framed[5] by these factors. In relation to this study, Jonathon Culler's critique is also well taken that one should speak of "framing," as though the actual art objects are the primary focus of this study, art does not exist in a vacuum.[6] In reality, visual art products are texts (contexts of ideas and practices) that have been framed by such factors and systems of value.

I have aimed to achieve some form of "fusion of horizons" between myself as the researcher, the art and the artists I am researching,[7] as a hermeneutical device to approach their works. As this study is based on my interpretation of the artists' constructions of Cuban identity and there may be things about the artwork that the artist is not aware of and/or was not part of what they intended. Therefore, my research methodology is situated in-between a hermeneutics of the 'author' and a hermeneutics of the 'text'.

In line with the ideas outlined above, Panofsky's iconographical methods and semiotics will be utilised to deal with the formal aspects and content and meaning of the 'texts'. Both methods have validity in this study and are considered complementary with one

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[4] Gilane Tawadros, "The Sphinx contemplating Napoleon: black women artists in Britain," *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 25.
[5] Mary Kelly, "(P)age 49: on the *subject* of history," *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 148.
[6] Jonathon Culler, *Framing the Sign: Criticism and Its Institutions* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1988), xiv.
[7] Hans Georg Gadamer, *Truth & Method*, (London: Sheed & Ward, 1975), 300, 306–307.

another in the process of attempting to understand artworks.

Erwin Panofsky's art historical methodology maintains that the visual arts can be read as indicators of cultural and social ideologies that relate to artists' senses of 'being' and identity, and to the dynamics of ideological, philosophical, national and political relations within the realm(s) in which the artists and works exist. Indeed, Panofsky considered every cultural fact and object as a way of expressing one's *Weltanschauung*.[8]

This method is of value to this study because these artists have been self-consciously preoccupied with questions of identity in their artistic explorations as the critical framework in which they have pursued artistic careers. Their art creations encompass an eclectic range of materials, mediums and styles, including prints, engravings, 2-D canvas, live performance, photography, multi-media and installation art. Yet they are also forms with socially constituted meanings framed in socio-cultural contexts by various discursive practices, institutional arrangements and mechanisms.

Panofsky's three tiered iconographical studies have been criticised for producing another piece of cultural history round the artwork, and in the process, the phenomenological experience of the artist and the formal aspects present within the text disappear into another text. However, an iconographical study does take into account the formal and empirical evidence on one level and the formal aspects of the art in this study will be addressed. From this basis, Panofsky's method will provide information about how specific works of art can function as historically revealing intellectual documents that are

[7] The literal translation of the German term "*Weltanschauung*" refers to one's general "worldview as a totality of body, mind and the world in which one exists.

informative about the artists' self-perceptions, concerns and realities.

Unlike Panofsky, however, I will adopt a post-modern slant in my investigations to attempt to find possible meanings in these works of art rather than a final meaning as Panofsky originally intended. I adhere to the relativist theory that any interpretation can only offer a possible reading, and the overall aim in my interpretative endeavour is not to attempt to arrive at any notion of final truths.[9]

In this regard a practical application of semiotic theory will also be useful. In recent years the field of semiotics has engaged with subjects of specific relevance to my exploration, such as the polysemy of meaning and the dynamism and density of signs to convey meaning and make signs active.[10] Semiotics involves the understanding of the visual image as a group of signs that communicate meaning, and attention is paid to the relationships between motifs as a visual language, rather than leaning toward a view of the motifs and the individual artist within a social and cultural context only. Semioticians examine the detailed elements to locate a 'grammar' of how signs express and what they could mean. For instance, the semiotic textual devices employed in chapters four, five and six help to extend the range of possible meanings for the works in sections on visual narratives and word and image and audience and reception. A semiotically based narratology provides a useful approach to visual methods of storytelling and the word/image relationship opens a reflective space between a work's initial sense data and its concept, and thus enunciates what hermeneutics describe as the "essential in-

[9] Mieke Bal, *Reading Rembrandt: Beyond the word-image opposition: the Northrop Frye lectures in Literary Theory*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 13, quoting Ernst van Alphen.
[10] Ibid., 14–15.

between" of our aesthetic engagement with art.[11] Similarly, the focus on the audience and the production and reception of artworks in various locations and contexts will illuminate the dialogic qualities of specific pieces and the role assigned to visual art practice within the Cuban context.

The term 'artists' is a loose and wide one, but to qualify my position, the women in this study are academically trained professional artists who have studied at Cuba's highest level of art education, the postgraduate institution, Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA). I have privileged artists from the ISA because they are acknowledged by the Cuban art system as 'real artists,' which gives some indication as to how the visual arts are perceived within Cuban society, and which will be explored in further detail in chapters one and two. Female artists account for approximately twenty five per cent only of those graduating from the ISA, and it seemed appropriate to concentrate on them, as there has been an historical tradition of neglecting or sidelining them. And especially in the under-researched area of contemporary Cuban art practices, female artists have had even less exposure than their male counterparts.

I have focused on these particular five female artists for various reasons. Firstly, during the course of my initial research in Cuba, their names were repeatedly mentioned by leading Cuban art specialists, including those previously mentioned, as important and exciting artists. During the course of the next few years I met all of these women and I was extremely impressed by their art productions and by each of them as individuals.

[11] J.R Nicholas Davey, "Writing and the in-between" *Word & Image. A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 16, no. 4 (2000):379.

So this selection is inevitably a subjective one, but the Cuban art establishment acknowledges these women as among the most successful and talented artists the country has produced in the last two decades. This includes their museum collections, critical reviews and the large number of prestigious exhibitions and events they have taken part in. Also, as they have all attended the ISA they are considered part of Cuba's plastic art elite, so my selection can be said to be representative of a certain Cuban view of what art and artists should be like. However, it is important to point out that the Cuban art system has produced many excellent artists — male and female — since the early 1980s, although there are proportionately less professional female artists than male ones.

Despite the varied stylistic and thematic approaches of these women, there are common points and characteristics found in their work: the female body/image; a concern with notions of identity; and a sense of pride and loyalty in being Cuban — all of which relate to their self-perception and underpins their pictorial oeuvres. These aspects unite the artists and bring a level of coherence to the study by illuminating the arguments I will develop throughout this thesis. They provide the ground for contrasts and comparisons between their approaches and allow an historical perspective to consider notions of Cuban female identity and the artistic use of the female form.

The opening three chapters focus on issues that relate to the formation of these women as Cubans and as artists, before proceeding on to analyses of their work in subsequent chapters. The first chapter introduces the artists and developments since the 1959 Cuban Revolution in art education, practice and ideology to set the artists within that critical framework. It charts the evolvement of the Cuban plastic arts sphere throughout

the decades. Particular focus is placed on the groundbreaking new art and art generations that burst onto the Cuban art scene from the early 1980s into the 1990s and the dramatic events that occurred within the art sphere following the demise of the former USSR in 1989.

Chapter two explores the parameters of Cuba's unique socialist structure and the Latin American aesthetic discourses and individuals, especially Ernesto 'Che' Guevara and José Carlos Mariátegui, who affected the ideology, sociology and trajectory of the Cuban plastic arts field. It examines the mistaken assumption that art produced in Cuba must be socialist realist art, as in other communist contexts such as the former USSR and Eastern Bloc countries art had the status of propaganda rather than culture with no freedom of self-expression.[12] Yet the trajectory of Cuban art has differed decisively from these socialist contexts. As products of the revolutionary process, ideologically and educationally, art generations post-1980 have been taught to critically analyse their contemporary realities and the evolvement of their country's socialist process. The result is that there are intellectual, ethical and socially relevant dimensions to contemporary Cuban art production and the visual arts have been nurtured as a serious profession receiving a unique and high level of institutional, pedagogical and ideological support.[13] Thus being a certain type of Cuban artist has specific societal, ideological and material privileges.

Chapter Three deals with various socio-cultural issues that relate to Cuban identity, worldviews and art production — gender, race and religion — from the pre- and post–

[12] Laura Kipnis, "Aesthetics and Foreign Policy," *Social Text* (fall, 1986): 89.
[13] I refer to Hall's broad definition of ideologies as "concepts, ideas and images which provide a framework of interpretation and meaning for social and political thought". Stuart Hall and Donald James, eds., *Politics and Ideology: A Reader* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1986), 36.

1959 contexts. Just as the notion of contemporary Cuban identity must take on board the socio-political developments that have occurred as a result of the 1959 Cuban Revolution, the country's African-derived heritage is also a fundamental element to consider, as is the enduring legacy of nineteenth century Cuban independence hero, José Martí. This chapter sets out relevant gender and socio-racial issues, such as feminism and *mestizaje* and the advancements and impact the Revolution has had in those areas, as well as the historical legacy of Afro-Cuban culture and religions and their connection to the female form. African-derived themes have been very relevant to the project of Cuban nation building and inform about pre- and post–1959 race, gender and social parameters and how particular visual images, especially the *mulata*, were employed to encode and define Cuban identity, obscuring the reality of social and racial inequalities.

The use of Afro-Cuban themes provides a sense of historical continuity in the plastic arts field and a useful platform to consider female art production in the contemporary period, female identity and the changing portrayal of African-derived themes, especially the female form, in relation to notions of Cuban identity. These themes are useful in terms of the diachronic connections to the Cuban visual arts tradition, and as a kind of hidden field of possibilities upon which the grammar of artistic representation has and continues to play out its game.[14]

From this chapter onwards, the representation of the female body as a manifestation of underlying Cuban cultural, ideological and social principles will be explored in relation to

[14] Ibid., 180.

Panofsky's "third" or "iconological" level of interpretation.[15] My understanding of this third level vis-à-vis this study is the female form as a cultural symbol, a marker or sign that can be meaningfully read in relation to notions of Cuban identity, culture and society.

All the artists in this paper utilise their own bodies and/or its trace/image in their art production. As an integral feature that underpins their pictorial oeuvres, it is possible to read their contemporary (as with the historical) use of the female body as an icon of memory, personal and collective. Chapter three sets out how reading bodies is a way of reading how history has been ordered and how identity is defined, as bodies record and make visible the effects of power relations within specific contexts. This topic will be examined over the next two chapters by recourse to the "bodies" Hilary Robinson discussed — the body of the artist, the body of the artwork and the representation of the body in the work.[16] Thus these 'bodily traces' become sites for meaningful social, personal and cultural discourse within the parameters of these artist's contemporary realities.

Chapters four and five deal with each artist's life and career trajectory. This is loosely structured to reflect a sense of artistic and chronological progression from artists and trends connected with the 1980s, with emphasis placed on the local Cuban context and personal and existential approaches, through to 1990s developments, when the focus became more international and socio-political in nature. These women's respective

[15] Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, (New Jersey and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 159–160.
[16] Robinson, Hilary, "Border Crossings: womanliness, body, representation," *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies*, ed. Katy Deepwell, (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995).

works present some trends and practices indicative of contemporary Cuban art practices. They stem from the same educational, pedagogical, ideological and institutional traditions but derive from different backgrounds and have led very different lives in varied geographical locations. These factors have affected the construction of their identities and their artistic outputs. Thus their individual creations give an indication of the complexity and diversity of contemporary Cuban art practices.

They utilise a diverse range of media in artworks that stand on their own merits for their technical and formal qualities. The topics they focus on range from personal, cultural, socio-economic, political and national issues to ideological, mythological, religious, philosophical and historical ones. They are concerned with notions of home, place, emigration and displacement; questions of race, ritual, gender and power; existential concerns of self and other; and historical and ideological traditions and beliefs. These themes provide a useful insight into the multi-various aspects present in contemporary Cuban art production and what issues are important to these individual women. Furthermore, their work highlights the complexities of the Cuban situation and how the sense of temporal progression evident in some of their corpuses links to their notions of self-perception and being Cuban. With regard to the concepts presented in this thesis, they require a certain level of understanding and knowledge by the reader. This will be set out but I also refer the reader to the glossary attached to this thesis for clarification on specific African-derived and Cuban terms.

After a brief opening discussion about the female body, myth and ritual, chapter four explores the art production of Marta María Pérez, Belkis Ayón and their focus on Afro-Cuban religious themes, myth, popular culture and ritual. The discussion moves on to

Magdalena Campos-Pons' early work and her interest with gender, social and race concerns before her relocation to the U.S. in 1990. Chapter five extends the discussion beyond the Cuban border to consider other topics relevant to notions of identity and contemporary reality for these artists — the Cuban Diaspora and emigration.

Being Cuban does not relate solely to these women's Cuban heritage or to their physical, geographical and temporal placement in space. Events in Cuba since the early 1990s have led to increased opportunities for certain artists, including those in this study, to travel, work and live outside of Cuba with exposure to different socio-cultural, economic and political ideologies, with ramifications for their art productions. This chapter examines Campos-Pons' art production since 1990 and the profound effect her displacement from Cuba has had on her work, choice of themes and her notions of identity. The discussion moves on to consider 1990s artists still residing in Cuba, Sandra Ramos and Tania Bruguera and their various artistic concerns; Cuba's current socio-economic and ideological realities, poetry, power issues, popular culture, myth and history.

Chapter six explores the body of the audience in terms of the formal devices used in various artworks and their effectiveness to reach potential audiences. This discussion also broaches the subject of power within the art realm, as there are specific ideological and sociological ramifications and privileges inherent in being part of Cuba's plastic art elite within the country's unique socialist structure. The nature of the plastic arts as a communicative medium is another important facet concerning issues of power. Despite the Revolution's significant gains in this area it has not become a tool of mass communication. Paradoxically, the Cuban plastic arts spectrum remains an ideologically

and socially elite one, but at the same time it has evolved to embody the worldviews of ordinary Cubans and issues relevant to Cuban society as a whole. This potentially places contemporary Cuban art and artists in unique and powerful positions to comment on their society when other Cubans cannot.

It is clear that many topics and factors affect these women's art and lives, which are illuminating as to the complexities facing the Cuban nation at this particular historical juncture. Moreover, the privileged role the visual arts field has been afforded in the Cuban socialist system has affected these women's sense of self-perception. As successful, professional artists, these women are part of Cuba's 'revolutionary plastic arts elite' and are placed in increasingly visible and influential positions outside of Cuba, allowing the plastic arts and artists unique discursive and communicative possibilities. However, the paradox is that the success of these artists and their increased opportunities to work and live overseas actually distance them from daily realities and audiences in Cuba. This is not to demean these women's significant and important contributions to the field of the Cuban visual arts, as they inform about contemporary Cuban social realities, on and off island and generate layers of meaningful discourse regarding the complexities of being Cuban and contemporary Cuban society. Their works of art can be read as sites of active negotiation of their status and societal position as (Afro) Cubans, females and artists.

Chapter One

The Contemporary Cuban Visual Art Sphere

The Artists

Marta María Pérez and María Magdalena Campos-Pons are associated with the groundbreaking 1980s art generations and ideologies, and both artists continue to work and exhibit extensively up to the present time. They are the same age and both graduated from the ISA in 1984 and 1985 respectively, yet their personal life trajectories and their art production have differed substantially. Pérez was born in 1959 in Havana in a working class neighbourhood or *barrio*. She studied at Escuela de Artes Plásticas San Alejandro (1975–1979) and at the ISA (1979–1984). She married her ISA supervisor and fellow 1980s Cuban artist, Flavio Garcíandia (b.1954), in mid–1980s and they had twin daughters in 1986. Garcíandia is also a highly acclaimed professional artist and their respective career paths have led them to exhibit extensively overseas and to have the opportunity to live in Germany during the early 1990s. In 1995 they relocated to Monterrey, Mexico, where they continue to reside. Despite the move to Mexico, Pérez is not exiled from Cuba and she continues to return to that country on a very regular basis to visit family and friends and to exhibit, as well as taking part in a number of international exhibitions and biennials. She has consistently worked in the same medium throughout her career — black and white photography — and been concerned with gender issues and Afro-Cuban themes and religious practices in her conceptual artistic processes.

In contrast to Pérez, Afro-Cuban María Magdalena Campos Pons, also born in 1959, has experimented with many mediums in her artistic practice and she has progressed from two-dimensional works on canvas to Polaroid photography, sculpture, multi-media projects, live performance and installations. She has also explored a range of topics from Afro-Cuban themes and gender and race issues to displacement and the African slave trade. She grew up in a small sugar plantation town, La Vega in Matanzas province but she trained in Havana at the Escuela Nacional de Arte (ENA) (1976–1980), at the ISA (1981–1985), then the Massachusetts College of Art in Boston, U.S. (1987–1988). She studied and worked in the U.S. and Canada in the late 1980s, before her marriage to an American citizen and relocation to Boston, U.S. in 1990. She did not return to Cuba until November 2000, though her husband and American born son have visited the artist's family on a regular basis. She has consistently been involved in international and major art events such as the Venice Biennials, in addition to her affiliation with the academic institution, the MIT List Visual Arts Center in Boston Massachusetts, U.S..

As with Campos-Pons, Belkis Ayón was of Afro-Cuban descent. Born in 1967 in a working class neighbourhood of Havana, she studied at the Academia de Arte San Alejandro (1982–1986) and at the ISA (1986–1991), but had been exhibiting and receiving critical acclaim for her work in Cuba and internationally since her student days. She tragically committed suicide in September 1999 in Havana, at a time when she was arguably reaching the pinnacle of her career and achieving much international success and exposure. At the time of her death she was also the newly elected head of the division of visual arts at UNEAC (The Union of Cuban Writers and Artists) and a very respected professor of printmaking at San Alejandro and the ISA. Ayón lived in Havana,

where her family had strong ties with Castro and the Revolution, and her father was one of Castro's bodyguards, which I consider may have influenced her work and will be expanded upon in chapter four. Like Pérez, Ayón worked in only one medium — a specific type of collography — and her artistic corpus was solely concerned with the unique Afro-Cuban *Abakuá* religion and its mythology.

Tania Bruguera and Sandra Ramos have both risen to prominence in the 1990s following their graduation from the ISA. Bruguera was born in Havana in 1968 to a middle-class family; her father was a Cuban diplomat and the artist grew up in Lebanon and Panama as a child. Bruguera returned to live in Havana aged twelve and her parents divorced at that time. She studied at Escuela Elemental de Artes Plásticas 23 y 12 until 1983, Escuela Artes Plásticas San Alejandro (1984–1987) followed by the ISA (1987–1992). She has recently studied in Chicago, U.S. as part of a Master's study programme in multi-media, funded by a John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation Fellowship, but she still officially resides in Havana. Her art production has encompassed two-dimensional pieces as well as live performance, multi-media projects and installations. The themes that have concerned Bruguera have sometimes been controversial and include the social and political realities of the situation on island in Cuba in the 1990s, ritual and issues of guilt and elitism surrounding the artistic sphere. She is very much in demand as an artist and travels and exhibits extensively, taking part in many international exhibitions.

Like her contemporary Bruguera, Sandra Ramos was born in Havana into a middle-class professional family in 1969. She studied at the Escuela Elemental de Artes Plásticas 20 de Octubre until 1983, at the Academia de Arte San Alejandro (1985–1988) and the ISA

(1988–1993). Her early pieces were mostly two-dimensional canvas works and prints but since the mid–1990s, she has worked increasingly in multi-media and on installation based works. Like Bruguera, Ramos' artistic corpus has been preoccupied with the social and cultural realities facing Cuba in the 1990s and popular culture. She resides in Havana with her family, where she had her first child, a daughter, in 2001. Her collections span museums and galleries across the world including Canada, Tokyo, Germany, the U.S. and the Netherlands. She travels extensively to work and takes part in leading national and international exhibitions.

Post–1959 Art Developments

The evolvement of Cuban visual art practices within the Revolution has been fundamental to the formation of contemporary Cuban artists and their artistic concerns. The monumental 1959 Cuban Revolution profoundly affected the country and is referred to by Cubans as "*el proceso*,"[17] a process that has continually evolved to adapt to Cuba's changing reality over the last four decades.[18] *El proceso* has provided a level of economic and theoretical investment in the field of the visual arts that testifies to the importance the regime has placed on this sphere. With reforms at governmental, educational and institutional levels, affecting the ideology and sociology of Cuban art production as well as the trajectory of a Cuban iconography. This has been especially evident since the beginning of the 1980s.

[17] "*El proceso*" refers to the evolving Cuban revolutionary process. See David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America: 1910–1990*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 76.

[18] Dave Laing, *The Marxist Theory of Art*, (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978), 26. The genesis of the evolutionary nature of a revolutionary process stems from Vladimir Iiyich Lenin and Leon Trotsky who both believed that in the cultural sphere the communist revolution was an evolutionary one. Its job was to select the best from previous epochs, make it available to the masses and build upon it.

Artists who have emerged since the 1980s have all been born within the post–1959 era and trained within that cultural, educational and ideological system and so can be considered the products of the Revolution in terms of their utopian social, educational and ideological beliefs. However, it was developments in art education from the very early days of the Revolution that set the stage for later developments from the 1980s onwards.

The setting up of the Escuela Nacional de Arte-Cubanacán (ENA) in 1962 was a radical departure from the existing art educational facilities in Cuba. It became one of Cuba's two national middle art schools, along with San Alejandro, and the ideology behind its curriculum was to change art education into what had been practiced at the Cuban Estudio Libre during the 1930s and the German *Bauhaus*.[19] The Estudio Libre, created in 1936, proved to be one of the important legacies of the Cuban Modernist art movement. It was conceived as an alternative to the Cuban Academy, San Alejandro, and was open to avant-garde European ideas with its main aim to promote "a national art in the context of the utmost creative freedom".[20] It functioned like an open studio and although skill instructions were given, aesthetic decisions were left up to the students. In the Estudio environment the need to learn how to feel and experience became more important than to learn how to paint in a technical sense,[21] with the ethos and approach being more consciously phenomenological.

Following on from this model, artistic diversity was fostered during the early years at the ENA and it became a known focus for the visual arts, with important international artists

[19] Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), 156.
[20] Ibid., quoting Yolanda Wood, *De la plástica cubana y caribeña*, (Havana: Editorial de Letras Cubanas, 1990), 62.
[21] Ibid.; Wood, 63.

and critics involved in its activities.[22] There was a liberal attitude to artistic and cultural endeavours, which reflected the generally free atmosphere, as well as the artistic and intellectual openness to western ideas during the early 1960s in Cuba. Silkscreen poster art became the dominant Cuban artistic movement in the 1960s, drawing on U.S. pop art and Polish poster art traditions.[23] In ideological terms, the works of European intellectuals including non-orthodox Marxist theorists such as Louis Althusser were also promoted.[24]

However the dynamic altered at the ENA by the late 1960s, reflecting deeper societal changes as Cuban pro-Soviet sectors became more influential in all spheres. An increasingly repressive and dogmatic cultural climate developed as Cuba became dependent economically on the USSR and so more closed to western ideas and influences. Cultural restrictions and political dogma took the place of the more liberal attitudes prevalent earlier in the decade and the ENA became more pedagogically conservative.[25] Officially, specific aesthetic directives were not given to visual artists even during this phase in Cuba's history and it has been stated that there was not a political drive to implant socialist realism in Cuba.[26]

However, according to young Cuban artists studying and working in the 1970s, there was such a drive.[27] It took the form that those, often mediocre, Cuban artists who pursued socialist realist aesthetics and supported the culture of politics were officially

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[22] Ibid.
[23] Ibid., 109–112.
[24] Pedro Pérez Sarduy, interview by author, tape recording, London, August 1999.
[25] Craven, 84.
[26] The Declaration of the First National Congress of Education and Culture (1971) stated, "[The] Revolution frees art and literature from the inflexible mechanisms of supply and demand that rule over bourgeois society. Art and Literature will cease to be merchandise, and all possibilities will be offered for aesthetic expression and experimentation in its most diverse manifestations, based on ideological rigour and high technical qualification," Camnitzer, 126, translated from a reprint in *Cuadernos de Marcha,* no. 49 (May 1971): 84.
[27] Flavio Garcíandia, interview by author, tape recording, Monterrey, Mexico, 3 March 2000.

endorsed through art patronage and pedagogy.[28] Therefore, many artists became preoccupied with a more traditional Marxist expression of nationality and identity.[29] There were also examples of visual artistic repression, including the harassment of seminal 1950s artists and early 1960s ENA professors, Antonia Eiriz (1929–Miami, 1995), Raúl Martínez (1927–1995) and Umberto Peña (1937), who suffered at the hands of the authorities during the dark period of the early 1970s.

In addition to politically acceptable artists being favoured for promotion in the 1970s in Cuba, art literature now promoted also demonstrated a distinctly Soviet bent. Books by conservative Soviet aestheticians such as Avner Zis replaced literature by western Marxist aestheticians. These included Ernst Fischer and Roger Garaudy who had undertaken a radical reappraisal of the tenets of socialist realism in the 1960s, as well as the work of Mexican socialist aesthetician and philosopher, Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez.[30]

Crucially though, it was photo-realism that, from 1973–1979, represented a powerful alternative aesthetic form to socialist realism for many young Cuban artists acting as a "preparatory platform" for the new art that would develop throughout the 1980s.[31] Changes began to occur in the artistic and cultural atmosphere by the late 1970s as part of the national democratisation of decision-making, reinvigorated by the 1976 new Cuban Constitution. General guidelines for artistic expression were included in the new Constitution providing written discourse as a rough guiding force for the trajectory of the Cuban visual arts. The wording was very simplistic, yet the implications it held for future artists and their art productions were profound, even though this was not the direct

[28] Ibid.
[29] Camnitzer, 130.
[30] Ibid., 127.
[31] Ibid., 10–14.

intention of the Cuban authorities. The new Cuban Constitution, Chapter IV, Point (d) of Article thirty-eight stated that artistic creation and forms of expression were free as long as their content did not oppose the Revolution. This subtle wording, in conjunction with a generally less Soviet-inspired environment, provided loose official parameters that allowed an ideological and artistic space for artists to begin to foster their creative development.

A Ministry of Culture to oversee all art institutions was set up, which reflected that the Cuban regime was beginning to redress the cultural mistakes of the previous Soviet-influenced years. The new Ministry was more liberal than its predecessor — *Consejo Nacional de Cultura* — and the Ministry became crucial in defending critical viewpoints and pluralistic art practices.[32] By the early 1980s Cuba's cultural politics started to re-emphasise the country's connections to the western world, without lessening the importance of its links to the USSR, Eastern Europe and Latin America.[33]

In addition, a new post-graduate art institution, the Instituto Superior de Arte (ISA) was established in Havana, which was a milestone in the Cuban visual arts and represented the culmination of the Revolution's art educational aspirations. As the highest level of academic art training in Cuba, the ISA has provided a five-year course of study with a very low student to faculty ratio. Its ethos has also differed from other Cuban art institutions as students have been encouraged to actively engage in the art scene before graduating and they are deemed to already be professionals who are there to further their expertise.[34] In ideological terms, the curriculum has been based on applying

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[32] Craven, 81.
[33] Antonio Eligio Fernández, "The Island, the Map, the Traveler: Notes on recent trends in Cuban art," *Cuba — Maps of Desire*, ed. Gerald Matt, trans. Heidemarie Markhardt (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 24.
[34] Camnitzer, 159–160.

Marxist-Leninist theory to the problems that have arisen from the implementation of communism in Cuba. These objectives have placed emphasis on a process of logical thinking, objective evaluation and the development of aesthetic concepts drawn from a vast range of aesthetic expressive means to produce personal artistic languages that are most suitable for the individual artist and their ideas.[35] What is tacitly implied at the ISA is the notion that the artist has an "organic responsibility" to think critically about the connections and correlations between the individual and the "common good".[36] The common good is not explicitly set out though, so there is an ethical dimension to the intellectual life of Cuban artists.

Furthermore, whereas social, cultural and politically critical art in the U.S. or the UK usually refers to art in opposition to the ruling system, in Cuba it has meant an art integrated into the system, with the function of critically questioning it.[37] In other words, professional Cuban plastic artists have been afforded an active intellectual and social dimension to their practices.

Indeed, being an artist has specific connotations in the Cuban socialist context that is worthy of discussion. Fidel Castro has described art schools as the "Cinderellas" of the education system, as well as galleries and museums as part of the general improvement of Cuban national living standards.[38] In this vein, the Minister of Culture, Armando Hart Davalos stated in 1983 that the aim for the future was for art to penetrate all spheres of Cuban life.[39] By the 1980s the Cuban art system guaranteed employment for artists

[35] Ibid., 169–170.
[36] Ibid., 129
[37] Ibid.
[38] Ibid., 166. Castro announced this during the 1968 4th Congress of the UNEAC.
[39] Craven, 81.

after graduating, which removed market pressures to a greater extent. However, this system proved to be a victim of its own success as it generated too many artists for the Cuban market, with negative repercussions for female artists.

One of the paradoxes of the Cuban situation in the 1980s was the very limited national art purchasing market, in line with the country's communist parameters. In addition, the economic problems that beset Cuba in the mid–late 1980s meant that structural changes were necessary to the Cuban art system by the end of the decade to avoid mass unemployment among artists. This led to many art students being redirected away from the plastic arts to the applied arts instead, in order to find employment after graduation.

Most telling about the position of the plastic arts within the new artistic structural set up in the late 1980s was the government's assertion that "real artists would only be those who graduated from the ISA".[40] This spoke volumes as to the place the plastic arts have been afforded within Cuba's communist regime. Moreover, Castro's use of the term 'Cinderella' to describe art schools indicated the Cuban regime's acknowledgement of the special position and privileges associated with the plastic arts and artists. Even during the turbulent late 1980s, an extra year of study was added to teachers' education curriculum to deal with the aesthetic education of children, reinforcing the importance that has been placed on the plastic arts as an integral part of social production.[41] Thus the Cuban revolutionary process has nurtured the plastic arts as a serious profession and has afforded certain artists special societal and educational privileges within the wider Cuban community.

[40] Camnitzer, 161.
[41] Ibid., 166.

1980s

The 1980s decade heralded major changes in Cuban art-making activities and signaled a turning point in Cuban artistic and cultural consciousness. Leading Cuban art critics agree that the emergence of *Volumen Uno* (1981), the first 1980s generation, changed the perception of art in Cuba in a broad sense,[42] and art production since then has been described as "the most powerful visual arts phenomenon in Latin America".[43] The "*Volumen Uno*" generation rebelled and reacted against 1970s Cuban art traditions, which was the most repressive, dogmatic and Soviet-influenced era in Cuba's history.

Young 1980s artists took issue with the conservative artistic constructions prevalent during the 1970s and began to critique existing artistic values, seeking to promote new ideologies. They also felt that the Cuban art system was very ignorant of what was happening in the wider art world and they wanted to change that. The early 1980s was a time when young Cuban artists sought to establish their own identities and artistic territories to include Latin America, the entire Third World, the West and the non-West; an ambitious map that would be the space of a new perspective of universality.[44] Successive 1980s generations took advantage of methodologies developed in the West, while at the same time producing art from a non-western stance. They utilised the "international artistic meta-language" and considered global contemporary topics whilst also embracing uniquely Cuban elements.[45]

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[42] Camnitzer used the terms "1st/2nd/3rd Generation" to categorize the various movements, ideas and developments that occurred in the Cuban art world from 1980 onwards. Whilst other art historians have questioned these categorisations, I will drawn upon Camnitzer's general categorising terminology to help identify and explain specific developments in the Cuban visual arts. The characteristics of these "generations" will be discussed in-depth relation to specific artists' works from chapter four onwards.

[43] Raul Navarro, "Foreword," *New Art from Cuba*, Catalogue (London: *n.p.*, 1995). Judgements about these developments are the common consensus of Cuban and Latin American critics.

[44] Fernández, "The Island," 3.

[45] Craven, 79.

As a result, the heterogeneity of art practices since the 1980s has been extremely varied, making any identification of specific trends difficult, "save for their diversity".[46] Yet some discernable general traits about the 1980s decade can be mentioned. There was a critical re-engagement with avant-garde art from the West along with the reclamation of African and Latin American cultural values; usage of elements of vernacular culture; and a renewed concern with the ethical role of art in line with the utopian ideals of the early 1960s in Cuba.[47] In keeping with this process, artistic trajectories have been diverse in form and content, including kitsch, Latin American and Afro-Cuban ethnography, ritual and spirituality, Abstract, environmental, Pop and Op art, Conceptual, Surrealist, Constructivist and neo-figurative tendencies.[48]

From the early 1980s Cuban plastic artists have deliberately and self-consciously sought to construct their sense of identity to express what being Cuban means for them and to confront contemporary Cuban problems by producing culturally proactive work.[49] They have been less preoccupied with blatantly displaying their identity, but instead have utilised the "characteristics of a symbolic artistic discourse" to consider their notions of self-perception.[50] They have drawn on Cuban mythological and religious thought as a catalyst for considering ideas about their self-definition and Cuban nationality, and in the process began to deal with their socio-cultural realities and personal issues that had been absent during the Sovietphile 1970s decade.

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[46] Ibid., 94, quoting Gerardo Mosquera.
[47] Ibid.
[48] However, the artists discussed in this thesis have not employed all of these methods including Constructivist, Environmental, Op and Surrealist art.
[49] Luis Camnitzer, "The Third Bienal of Havana," *Third Text* 10 (1990): 84.
[50] Gerardo Mosquera, "Contexts," *Cuba – Maps of Desire*, ed. Gerald Matt, trans. Heidemarie Markhardt (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 77.

This is in keeping with the practices of fellow contemporary Latin American artists such as Mario Cravo Neto (Brazil), Guillermo Kuitca (Argentina), Carlos Fajardo (Brazil), María Fernanda Cardoso (Colombia), Gonzalo Díaz (Chile) and Julio Galán (Mexico), who have also been concerned with notions of otherness and the question of origins. In reality, no single notion of cultural identity exists for the countries in Latin America and the continent has recently been described as the continent of the "semi", i.e. semi-modern, semi-developed, semi-European, semi-indigenous.[51] A reflexive relation to their history was manifested in twentieth century art developments across Latin America, as avant-garde movements such as the Afro-Cuban movement took over European Modernism. In this process artists transformed it into a critical dialogue of tradition and innovation and of similarity and difference, constituting their history of the present.[52] This indicates that Latin American identity is a very complex issue, bound up with many issues. As Cuban-American critic Coco Fusco succinctly explained, the new (Cuban) artists post–1980 have built on the multilateral nature of Cuban culture, constructing their own synthesis. They have sought identity as a form of action and the process has not been to locate a pre-existing identity, but to construct one. From her viewpoint as a woman of Cuban origin, this is what she interprets that it means to be Cuban.[53]

From the mid–1980s, Cuban plastic artists began to use their artistic platforms to critically assess and question their revolutionary process and events taking place in Cuban society. This ability to comment arose through a combination of their advanced art educational training facilities and the coming to fruition of specific socialist ideologies

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[51] Mari Carmen Ramírez, "Beyond 'the Fantastic': Framing Identity in U.S. Exhibitions of Latin American Art," *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995), 230–231, quoting Argentinean cultural theorist, Néstor García Canclini.

[52] Charles Merewether, "Light me another Cuba – Late Modernism after the Revolution," Catalogue (*Made in Havana: Contemporary Art from Cuba)*, (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1988), 15.

[53] Craven, 114, quoting Coco Fusco, "Art & Cuba Now," *The Nation* (24 June, 1991): 858 ; idem, "Drawing new lines," (24 October, 1988): 397–400.

concerning the role of art and artists in Cuban society, which will be discussed more fully in the following chapter. The results, visible in post–1980s art practice, was an increased sense of artistic ethical and moral responsibility and the development of dialogical tendencies in contemporary visual art practices as artists concerned themselves with issues that were relevant to the lives of ordinary Cubans. By commenting on issues that were preoccupying everyone in Cuba at that time, plastic art practices became invested with greater social and political content after the mid–1980s. This coincided with growing domestic unrest and occurred as a response to the social, economic and ideological upheavals facing the population, with respect to the major changes occurring in the USSR. It was the era of *Glasnost* and *Perestroika* and there was ideological uncertainty throughout Cuba, with no political definition about what would happen and what the Cuban government was going to do.

Furthermore, there was not one, singular clear statement about the political 'wall' or social 'wall' for the visual arts coming from governmental or institutional sources at that time. By 1989 this situation culminated in a variety of censored art events and changes within the art establishment as a consequence of the barrage of social and political criticism being produced in the visual arts. Ideologically the atmosphere became more tense and closed. It did, however, lead to a tremendous moment in art, with enormous activity and a number of brilliant students and artists pushing boundaries everywhere.[54] Despite the high standards of contemporary Cuban art, these artists, as with their Latin American peers have been placed outside of the mainstream art world and considered peripheral in many contemporary western art circles. This is despite the esteemed

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[54] Garcíandia interview, 2000.

institutions and events they have been involved with, including prestigious international galleries, museums, biennials and other major art events. This gives some indication of how Cuban culture exists simultaneously in three distinct social spheres and realities: third world, primitive and first world. Economically, culturally and socially Cuba is affiliated to the rest of Latin America and considered, at least in economic terms, to be a third world nation. The strength and survival of African-derived traditions have also led to the western assumption of 'primitive' practices. Whereas, in terms of intellectual and cultural achievement, health and educational developments, Cuba has demonstrated its "first world pretensions". [55]

Of these three overlapping realities, first world pretensions have precedence in relation to the art production discussed in this paper. These women are highly educated, erudite and sophisticated artists who are open to and knowledgeable about contemporary international intellectual discourses and art trends, and they have produced complex and thought provoking artworks. Moreover, all have either lived, studied and/or worked overseas and have approached issues that are central to the postmodern and postcolonial debate on multiculturalism, such as the notion of multiple cultural identities, which is a significant feature of contemporary reality.

1990s: A Changed Worldview

The artistic endeavours of the artists in this paper have revealed a constant intellectual probing that has taken divergent paths in formal and content terms. What is clear is that there has been a conscious search for what it means to be Cuban in all their work, as a

[55] Gerardo Mosquera, Elegguá at the (Post) Modern Crossroads," *Santeria Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington and London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 244–256.

means of personal reaffirmation, irrespective of their physical locations in time and space. This has been due in part to the theoretical framework that contemporary artists have worked in since the 1980s. However, for those who have remained on island during the 1990s, their art production has reflected the social, economic and ideological developments that have occurred since the beginning of that decade. Indeed, scholars have observed that the turbulent 1990s have meant that Cuba's artists have had to contend with a crumbling economy and a political system that has not sought or been able to effectively modify its "antiquated nationalism".[56]

The events of the late 1980s and early 1990s proved to be a huge trauma for Cuba in every sphere. In addition to the ideological crises Cuba has undergone, severe shortages in all spheres of Cuban life from food to public transport, and even newsprint compounded the dire situation on island. The early 1990s witnessed the redirections of allocated funds designated for art and education into the development of basic production, with a lack of materials and resources available to artists, borne of Cuba's wider economic crisis. The artistic and cultural closure that occurred in Cuba after 1989 placed artists and intellectuals in very difficult positions. On one hand, the official line was that artists should not discuss certain issues because it was an extremely difficult time politically and ideologically for the country. On the other, these artists were products of the revolutionary experience and educated to believe they had the ideological freedom to critically question the system and suddenly they were told they could not. This tension was apparent within the ISA, reflecting the situation outside. Politics and the flexibility of the Cuban system were constantly discussed, as the students wanted to analyse and criticise many aspects of Cuban society.

[56] Coco Fusco, "Cuban Art, Foreign Interests," Catalogue (*Cuba: La Isla Posible*), (Spain: Ediciones Destino, 1995), 252.

In addition to the restrictions placed upon artists, the replacement of various key figures within the art structure occurred as part of the overall changes in the art scene. The conservative Omargo Sales replaced the liberal Vice-Minister of Culture in charge of the visual arts, Marcia Leiseca. Other liberal officials such as the director of the Centro de Desarrollo des Artes Visuales, Beatriz Aulet were moved. Gerardo Mosquera resigned his post at the Centro Wifredo Lam and Flavio Garcíandia left his teaching position at the ISA to work in Europe (his wife, Pérez, left with him). Therefore in political, economic, ideological and artistic terms, plastic artists began the 1990s decade with a "disconcerting panorama on the horizon".[57] To add to this, the vast majority of 1980s artists and intellectuals chose to leave Cuba for political and/or economic reasons throughout the 1990s.

Like other Cubans, artists' belief in Utopia has been steadily declining since the late 1980s, but the art production of the 1990s generations has continued to show the critical and social perspective typical of the new art.[58] Art since the 1990s has been the expression of a post-Utopian ideology and lived experience, in which artists have responded to the cultural, social and political changes Cuban society has undergone. Tania Bruguera and Sandra Ramos are artists who have risen to prominence in the 1990s and have been ironically termed "*la mala yerba*" (*the weeds*) by leading contemporary art critic, Gerardo Mosquera. They are so called because of how quickly they sprang up and multiplied under extremely difficult circumstances. The rise of these artists succinctly illustrates the inherent capacity of Cuban culture to become stronger in critical moments, driven by a mechanism of survival.[59] The decision by most artists

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[57] Camnitzer, 164.
[58] Mosquera, "Contexts," 83.
[59] Ibid., 81.

graduating in the 1990s to remain living in Cuba was in part a reaction to the experiences of 1980s generations who had left the country. There were subtle rumours circulating in Cuba by the mid-1990s about the bad experiences and living conditions of the artists who had left. As Bruguera states

"The Cubans that left had to live with Capitalism for the first time, with no experience of doing so and coming from very socialist mindsets. I think it was a big struggle for them".[60]

The loss of 1980s generations and the country's ideological and economic problems meant that the 1990s Cuban internal art scene was not as vibrant as it had been during the 1980s and the cultural energy not as fresh. However, 1990s artists have sought to conserve some of the avant-garde spirit of the previous decade, despite harsh economic and social conditions prevailing on the island, yet their perspectives have differed from those artists who studied and began working during the 1980s. As Cuban art historian, Gerardo Mosquera points out, artists since the 1990s have had to work within the contradictions of the present socio-political processes.

"Socialist fundamentalism is paralleled by an opening towards foreign capital; the authoritarian system by commercialisation and sex tourism".[61]

Artists working in Cuba since the 1990s are thus destabilised and simultaneously threatened and strengthened by the present difficulties they face and by the rich but contradictory nature of Cuban reality. 1980s artists were very concerned with their context and immediate environment, how to express their ideas socially and how to make art function beyond the gallery space. Generations from the 1990s onwards have been less connected with the Cuban art environment, as they have sought to produce

[60]Tania Bruguera, interview by author, tape recording, New York, 9 December 1999.
[61] Ibid.

art that can be understood abroad, or at least to try to appeal to an audience that differs from the audience that visit galleries in Cuba.[62] The emphasis has shifted away from an institutionalised 'art for the people,' to an art often aimed at, and accessible to, the international art market. As Mosquera has aptly stated,

> "It is part of Cuba's drama that artists [since the 1990s] cannot continue a career only being in Cuba, they have had to look outside, which has affected a stronger arts scene developing in Cuba".[63]

In respect to the differences between 1980/1990s generations of artists, seminal 1980s artist and ISA teacher, Flavio Garcíandia has pointed out that it would be silly to ask for idealism or a sense of utopia from younger art generations, as there are no more utopias in Cuba.[64] The need to exhibit and sell outside Cuba in order to survive, in conjunction with the exodus of many artists from the island has led to a changed artistic dynamic and increasingly solitary artistic activities. In a discursive sense, the parameters of communicative ability have altered for visual artists, within and outside of Cuba, in an official and commercial sense. Whilst there have still been censorship issues and bouts of repressive behaviour by the Cuban authorities, a new situation has been created since the 1990s.[65]

The Cuban government's view of artistic production in the 1990s is as a "rarefied cash crop" and the abundance of Cuban art has led to much interest from the international art market.[66] This has been aided by the U.S. government's decision in 1991 to exempt Cuban art from the thirty-year embargo, after U.S. artists, dealers and critics complained

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[62] Fernández interview.
[63] Mosquera interview, 17 February 2000.
[64] Garcíandia interview.
[65] Mosquera interview, 17 February 2000.
[66] Michael Z. Wise, "Tweaking the Beard of the Maximum Leader," *New York Times,* 12 June 1994, sec. H, pp. 35

that it hindered the free flow of ideas.[67] Cuban artists have even stated that particular artworks are partly calculated to sell to foreign collectors as curiosities from one of the world's last remaining communist regimes.[68] This attitude demonstrates the sophisticated and streetwise approach of contemporary Cuban artists, as they are aware that they are in vogue and they know exactly what foreign collectors want to see. For example, curators from the U.S. particularly like provocative works that question the Cuban system.

As a result of the changed parameters in art production, there has been increasing self-censorship by artists and they have adopted new imagery and different strategies to create elliptical art pieces, though still containing social content. Parody and irony have been crucial components that contain important emancipatory dimensions for Cuban art practices, as they are doubly coded[69] and so have been essential strategies for the articulation of a critical stance. Thus the critical radicalism of art has increased, protected by a greater metaphoric density and cynical attitude.[70] Other instruments frequently used by artists include the appropriation of images and quotations and a growing discursive intertextuality between religious, political and cultural elements.

Contemporary works of art have dealt with the identifying signs of current Cuban life; exploring and reflecting the contradictions and dualities of a society striving to remain socialist in many senses, but needing to earn U.S. dollars in order to survive and buy basic goods. Consequently these art productions have multiple references and implications and artists have often resorted to figurative meanings, tropes and

[67] Fernández interview.
[68] Bruguera interview.
[69] Merewether, 11.
[70] Mosquera, "Contexts," 83.

paraphrases. This has led Cuban art historian Erena Hernández to speak of contemporary Cuba as a "tropological island".[71]

Having explored the Cuban art sphere post–1959, it is apparent that monumental developments since the 1980s have occurred as the result of educational and ideological reforms within e*l proceso* and the plastic 'high' arts, with certain artists being assigned special places and roles within the system. The contemporary plastic arts sphere is a vibrant, innovative and socially relevant arena producing sophisticated, avant-garde pieces. The following chapter will extend the discussion to explore the effects of the 1959 Revolution and Cuba's specific socialist aesthetic ideals, to assess the ramifications for the contemporary Cuban art sphere and the female artists and their art production in this thesis.

[71] Ibid.

Chapter Two

Art Within the Revolution

Cuban Marxism

An examination of the Cuban socialist context is essential because the artists in this study have been immersed within that system as part of their formative life and educational experiences and it is therefore very relevant to their senses of being and identity as Cubans, women and artists. Indeed, the artists who have emerged since the 1980s were the first in Cuban history to be "psychosocially defined,"[72] which sets them apart from their international counterparts and merits consideration. This chapter briefly sets out the communist context and considers the indigenous socialist ideologies underlying contemporary art practices and their implications in relation to the parameters of the plastic arts sphere.

Fidel Castro's (1926)[73] government was driven to adopt Marxist-Leninist structures by the logic of its reform agenda and the socialist nature of the Cuban revolutionary process was declared in 1961. Although orthodox Marxist figures, Karl Marx (1818–1883) and Vladimir Ilyich Lenin[74] (1870–1924) did influence the revolutionary process in Cuba and their ideas retained validity, the development of socialist aesthetic ideals in Cuba has taken a unique route. It has drawn on pre–1959 Cuban art traditions, non-heterodox and non-Soviet socialist references, as well as international art movements and ideologies.

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[72] Osvaldo Sánchez, "Children of Utopia," Catalogue (*No Man is an Island: Young Cuban Art*), Finland: Pori Art Museum, 1990), 59.

[73] Castro became Prime Minister in February 1959 until 1976 when he became President of the Council of State and Council of Ministers. He has also been commander in chief of Cuba's armed forces since 1959 and the first secretary of the central Committee of the Communist Party of Cuba.

[74] Lenin was the leader and principal architect of the success of the Bolshevik Russian Revolution in 1917.

From the Revolution's outset, art educational possibilities were actively promoted with the provision of art education in schools, galleries and other arts institutions in every municipality. Yet despite the socialist bent of the revolutionary process, there was no initial concern to direct aesthetic solutions and changes were primarily content-oriented and concerned with creating a Marxist-Leninist frame of reference. Cuban artists were able to look at international trends to help define their national identity, unlike other socialist contexts such as the former USSR and the Eastern Bloc countries where there was a canonic imposition from the top down.[75]

Castro has stated that Cubans have interpreted socialist ideas as they should be interpreted: in an original manner, unique to each country and each revolutionary process.[76] He has also stressed the importance of each country's history and experiences in drawing up its own formulas.[77] This innovative Cuban approach led the USSR and the Eastern Bloc to ridicule Cuban Marxism as "tropical communism" by the mid–1960s.[78] They considered it a communism of the passions instead of scientific thought.[79] These points reiterate how Marxism in Cuba has been adapted to the country's socio-cultural and political context, with specific elements deemed necessary by them to construct their new society and based on ideas which reflect their specific history. It is therefore correct to surmise that an organically constructed socialist ideology exists in Cuba, rather than a mechanical application of orthodox Marxist-

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[75] Gerardo Mosquera, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, 17 February 2000.

[76] Gianni Minà, *An Encounter with Fidel: An interview by Gianni Minà,* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1991), 263–267. These excerpts were taken from a speech delivered by Castro on the thirtieth anniversary of the Committees to Defend the Revolution (CDR's), September 28, 1990.

[77] Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1994), 165. Fidel Castro's speech was entitled "Apply Theory to the Particular Conditions of Each Country," *Granma Weekly Review*, 7 August 1988.

[78] David Craven, *The New Concept of Art and Popular Culture in Nicaragua since the Revolution in 1979: An Analytical Essay and Compendium of Illustrations,* (Lewiston, New York: Edward Mellen Press, 1989), 262. This was indicated by the initial opposition from the Soviet-backed Communist Party of Cuba toward the Cuban Revolution, denouncing it as adventurism.

[79] Donald Hodges, *Intellectual Foundations of the Nicaraguan Revolution*, (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1986), 179, taken from the author's interview with the editors of *Pensamiento Crítico*, Havana, November 1968.

Leninism as per the Soviet model.

In keeping with the Cuban approach, the country's ideas expressed about socialist art and reality during the 1960s were totally removed from the Soviet approach, although they did link up with the more liberal position prevalent in Russia during the 1920s.[80] Socialist Realism was officially installed as party policy in the USSR in 1934 and upheld a "Reflectionist" aesthetic, in which art was seen to reflect rather than lead society.[81] The propagandistic function of art and artists was stressed and their subject matter moulded to the state's ideas with stylistic limits placed upon artists.[82]

Whereas in Cuba an official Cuban revolutionary style was never instituted and the subjective dimension of art production was not restricted as it had been in the USSR. Moreover, there was never a utopian will for transforming life through art in Cuba, as there had been with the Futurists and the Constructivists during the Russian Revolution when there was a radical reassessment of the function of the artist in society.[83] The official policy of the Cuban Revolution, as opposed to the USSR, has been to attempt to educate the people to the point where they can understand art, rather than to create an art that can be understood by the people.[84]

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[80] Margaret Rose, *Marx's Lost Aesthetic,* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 121–129, 139, 141. After the Revolution in 1917, Lenin's cultural and educational apparatus (Narkompros) defended the avant-garde art produced by the Constructivists, but economic problems in the early 1920s led Narkompros to place restrictions on art production and to support only those artists approved by Lenin and the party as useful propagandists.

[81] Georgi Plekhanov coined the aesthetic term "Reflectionism" and his views dominated Soviet Marxist art criticism after the Russian Revolution. Orthodox socialist realism maintains that the principle of reflection is paramount, otherwise art cannot produce genuine knowledge of the external world as a mirror of social reality. The artist's task is to represent what is officially approved. In the new communist countries of Eastern Europe, the cultural apparatus echoed this Soviet position. See Dave Laing, *The Marxist Theory of Art,* (New Jersey: Humanities Press, 1978), 15–40.

[82] Rose, 146.

[83] Mosquera interview, 17 February 2000.

[84] David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America: 1910–1990,* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 94, quoting Ernesto Cardenal, *En Cuba,* (1972), 189.

Moreover, Cubans have made concerted efforts to read Marx directly, and despite the Soviet belief that Marx was an authority for the doctrine of socialist realism, there is evidence to indicate the ahistorical nature of seeing Marx as a defender of socialist realism.[85] Marx developed a Materialist concept of art, which relates to it being the interpreter of its and our relationship to the material base. As a result he conferred a special status on artistic practices among social activities.[86] He stated that the implication was that art had a valid role to play in understanding the historical nature of the material production and development of our societies.[87] The Cuban revolutionary government has maintained this Marxist notion of art production as an important aspect of social productivity and has given the artist a valued role and place within Cuban society.[88]

Ernesto "Che" Guevara

As a key figure in the early revolutionary government, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara (1928–1967) was acutely aware that the Cuban people needed to acquire solid knowledge in relation to politics because without it socialism in Cuba could not be built.[89] Guevara was very thorough in his studies of Marxism and he was instrumental in laying the ideological and discursive foundations for the Cuban socialist framework, which he set out in *Socialism and Man in Cuba*.[90] This political awareness or consciousness has become an integral part of being Cuban and is directly referred to in Sandra Ramos' art

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[85] Rose. Her work examined Marx's aesthetic arguments in their historical context and set out how Marx developed a St Simonian concept of art as a form of socially important production and he stressed the productive, rather than consumptive nature and character of art in his later work.
[86] Laing, 25.
[87] Rose, 86.
[88] Camnitzer, 125.
[89] Minà, 125.
[90] Ernesto Guevara, *Socialism and Man in Cuba,* (New York: Pathfinder, 1989). This book was originally written in the form of a letter in 1965 to Carlos Quijano, the editor of *Marcha* (Montevideo).

production, to be discussed in chapter five.

Guevara remains an iconic symbol of revolutionary idealism and an exemplar of the model revolutionary man and his ideals have permeated Cuba on many levels, from education to the ideological, political, social and cultural sphere with long-term ramifications for plastic artists and art production. In discursive and ideological terms, *Socialism and Man in Cuba* and Fidel Castro's famous 1961 speech, "Palabras a los Intellectuales" (Words to the Intellectuals) were defining moments in the history of the Revolution and remained a "cultural spine" even during the Sovietphile 1970s decade.[91] The thrust of Castro's speech was that freedom of form was to be respected by the Revolution, in line with Lenin's early belief that greater scope had to be given to plastic artists to allow for personal initiative, individual inclinations, thought and fantasy, form and content.[92]

For Guevara, subjectivity was the key mover of history and the centrality of human action was the ideological cornerstone of his revolutionary theory.[93] He held that a revolution makes Marxists and as part of the process of building an advanced socialist society, a new consciousness had to be created, along with a new human being possessed of new values, known as the *hombre nuevo* (*new man*). Guevara maintained that the qualities of this new man included: solidarity, the brotherhood of all people, high education, selflessness, generosity, national dignity and an internationalist approach.[94]

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[91] Camnitzer, 125–126. Castro's speech took place in Havana on 30 June, 1961. Supposedly Castro never felt totally comfortable in the cultural sphere and it is rumoured that Guevara influenced this speech.
[92] Laing, 23, quoting from Lenin's 1905 article " Party Organisation & Party Literature" (1967): 21–26.
[93] James Petras, "Che Guevara and Contemporary Revolutionary Movements," *Latin American Perspectives* 25, Issue 101, no.4 (1998): 9–13.
[94] Craven, *New Concept of Art,* 143.

Furthermore, he believed that in Cuba this new consciousness would lead to a new revolutionary ethic, in conjunction with alterations in the material base of society.[95]

In the visual arts Guevara advocated broadening the expressive possibilities in the cultural field to increase the likelihood of future great artists and "true revolutionaries" and he advocated "the development of an ideological-cultural mechanism to permit free enquiry".[96] However, Guevara condemned the western concept of art as mere personal expression as well as the Soviet socialist realism, stating it was unacceptable for the revolutionary transformation of Cuban culture and dismissing the "frozen aesthetic forms of socialist realism".[97] Present-day generations of Cuban artists have been able to create art that is their personal expression in line with western traditions, but they do so from the position of the revolutionary future artist — the *hombre nuevo* — that Guevara envisioned. This will be especially evident in the work of Tania Bruguera, to be discussed in chapter five.

> "Revolutionaries will come who will sing the song of the new man in the true voice of the people".[98]

Yet he also stressed that it would take time for the revolution's ideological, educational and sociological changes to affect future generations. This has been borne out in the plastic art sphere from the early 1980s onwards, with the graduation and development of the art generations born and trained within *el proceso*, and Guevara's aspirations for Cuban plastic artists have come to fruition. These highly trained, sophisticated artists,

[95] Ibid., 269.
[96] Guevara, 12, 13.
[97] Ibid., 12.
[98] Ibid., 13

male and female, derive from and reflect the voice of the people and have remained connected to their roots and families and the concerns of ordinary Cubans.

José Carlos Mariátegui

The writings of Peruvian socialist thinker, José Carlos Mariátegui (1894–1930) have been extremely influential theoretical sources in a general sense for the Cuban visual arts post–1980 via Guevara's revolutionary aesthetic ideas.[99] Official Cuban sources have insisted that there is artistic freedom in Cuba: socialist artistic freedom,[100] which I suggest derives from Mariátegui's writings about avant-garde art practice, and these were the main anchor for the development of Guevara's ideas about aesthetics and socialism in Cuba. Guevara also stressed Mariátegui's importance by having his works published by the national Cuban press in the 1960s.[101]

Mariátegui devised a unique interpretation of socialist principles to account for the particular cultural conditions in Peru. His heterodox socialist views led him to reject the orthodox Marxist views that socialism must take the same path in every country and he found evidence to back this up in Marx's writings.[102] Mariátegui drew upon a multitude of European and Latin American contemporary experimental art trends to develop his own ideas about Peru's cultural renewal, including Surrealism and avant-garde movements in 1920s Russia.[103] For example, Mariátegui was impressed that the early Russian Revolution remained open to Cubist, Expressionist and Futurist experiments. At the

[99] Hodges, 189.
[100] Ileana Fuentes-Perez, "By Choice or by Circumstance," *Outside Cuba: Contemporary Cuban Visual Artists,* (New Jersey and Miami: Rutgers University and University of Miami, 1988), 23.
[101] Hodges, 182.
[102] David Craven, "Postcolonial Modernism in the work of Diego Rivera and José Carlos Mariátegui or New Light on a Neglected Relationship," *Third Text,* no. 54 (2001) : 13.
[103] Michael Löwy, Marxism and Romanticism in the work of José Carlos Mariátegui," *Latin American Perspectives* 25, Issue 101, no. 4 (1998) : 80.

same time they tried to educate the general public about art and preserved the artistic patrimony from pre-revolutionary Russian bourgeois culture.[104]

For Mariátegui, the best art was one that was both avant-garde and democratic. He believed that the relationship between art and social reality should be one of "engaged autonomy with the potential for revitalising the country's culture,"[105] which suggests that this seminal Latin American Marxist theorist saw a privileged and valuable societal role for artistic activity. For him, the activity of art was intimately connected to human life and for this reason he always returned to the notion of art's engagement with social developments.[106]

"The role of the most engaged artists or intellectuals in any social cause will always be to provoke debate and critique".[107]

For Mariátegui, a substantial and reliable connection with the people was the "source for art's organicity" and the sources for this organicity could be found in artists' "intuition of peoples' deeper concerns".[108] This Peruvian scholar also advocated that art be placed on a level footing with other intellectual activities to be undertaken by Peru's *hombres nuevos*, the specific term that Guevara borrowed for his own discourse about socialism in the Cuban context. Moreover, Mariátegui maintained that it was essential that artists' attitudes remain critical, as art was an eternally heterodox activity.

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[104] Vicky Unruh, "Mariátegui's aesthetic thought," *Latin American research Review* 58, XXIV, no. 3 (1989): 49, quoting Mariátegui, 1: 113–14.
[105] Ibid., 51, 65–66, quoting Mariátegui, 6: 47–48.
[106] Ibid., 54.
[107] Ibid., 51, 65-66, quoting Mariátegui, 6: 64.
[108] Ibid., 59, quoting Mariátegui, 6: 159, 15: 222.

The Impact of Socialist Ideas on Contemporary Art Production

The ideologies of another original Marxist scholar, the Mexican philosopher Adolfo Sánchez Vázquez, were also influential in the realm of the Cuban visual arts during the 1960s, and again from the 1980s. Considered the foremost Marxist theorist in Latin America during the 1960s–1970s, and another socialist intellectual in the mould of Guevara and Mariátegui, Sánchez Vázquez focused on art as a visual language with polysemic potential and he rejected the idea of any type of "normative style".[109] The theorists' mentioned above have been instrumental to the ideological and stylistic development of contemporary Cuban art practices, and in forming a heterogeneous creative environment from which complex, multifaceted works have emerged. This has influenced the choice of various methodologies employed in later chapters to approach the artists' work.

As previously discussed, the unique contribution of the Cuban Revolution has been to adapt Marxism to the peculiar conditions of their country. The heretical socialist influences on plastic artists indicate why contemporary Cuban art is not, and never has been merely a mirror of reality, assigned the passive role of reflecting the correct political line. Since the early 1980s artists, male and female, as *hombres nuevos* and products of the Revolution — ideologically, educationally and socially — have produced something else: a concept of art more materially formative and more socially transformative than the social realist concept of Reflectionism would allow.

[109] Craven, *Art and Revolution*, 107, 116.

As Craven has correctly pointed out,

> "A Reflectionist viewpoint overlooks the way a visual language can actively shape and transform the ideological values and political positions it transmits as part of a dynamic interchange".[110]

Cuban artists' post–1980 have instigated the development of the visual arts as a fundamental mode of human existence, and they have analysed the socio-cultural and ideological parameters of socialism in Cuba. Ideology has been integrated into Cuban culture and as artists they have had a platform from which to comment and engage in dialogue with their society.[111] These artists have questioned Castroist orthodoxies, but their aim has been to provoke dialogue and discussion, not counter-revolution. As for them the 1959 Revolution has not been a mythical thing to be revered, it is their lived reality and as such, they have not been concerned with maintaining some form of revolutionary purity, which was something more associated with artists and academics during the early 1960s.

The evolvement of visual art endeavours post–1980 has fostered a critical spirit and sought to raise the collective Cuban consciousness, which illustrates how these artists consider themselves part of an intellectual societal elite with a distinct role to play. As critically thinking intellectuals, the ethical and moral dimensions to contemporary artistic practices have been in keeping with the ideological parameters for artists set out by Guevara via Mariátegui. Contemporary Cuban art productions have fallen in line with

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[110] Ibid., 107.
[111] Camnitzer, 132–137.

what Guevara proposed at the outset of *el proceso.* Indeed, plastic artists have become the paradigm of the ideological and cultural promises Guevara proposed.[112]

Although the Cuban context for high art production is an elite one, these artists have bridged the social gap in Cuba as a consequence of the revolutionary process. They are men and women who have come from all social strata and ethnic backgrounds and who possess revolutionary consciences. Furthermore, they embody the Marxist concept of art production that Guevara envisioned: artists with a "humanist, cultivated and uninhibited mentality".[113]

Under *el proceso* there has been recognition of plastic artists' value to society, in terms of their contribution to the education of the people and in the formation of a new culture with historical, national and socialist roots.[114] This has meant that the Cuban frame of reference has had to take into account all the traditions that define the country's reality and identity, to reflect the syncretic character of the country's socio-cultural make-up and history. Indeed, the Revolution's aesthetic achievement was built on the premise that Cuban culture is a product of the dynamic process of hybridisation (*mestizaje*) that occurred under specific historical and social conditions.[115] Therefore, in contrast to the Soviet approach, Latin American derived Cuban aesthetic socialist ideas have drawn on many popular Cuban ideas and stories as part of the dialogical process.[116]

Consequently, African-derived and other popular contributions have been important

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[112] Sanchez, 59.
[113] Ibid., 57.
[114] Judith A. Weiss, *Casa de las Américas — An intellectual Review in the Cuban Revolution*, (North Carolina: Estudios de Hispanófila 44, 1977): 16.
[115] Craven, *Art and Revolution,* 76, quoting Gerardo Mosquera, "New Cuban Art: Identity and Popular Culture," *Art Criticism* 6, no. 1 (1989): 57–65.
[116] Craven, *New Concept of Art* , 268.

elements in plastic art production since the early 1980s, with artists drawing on these themes because they are valued as representative evidence of the cultural life of the people. Also, the artists who have utilised such themes, such as Pérez and Ayón, have derived from popular backgrounds themselves, so these topics have genuinely reflected their identities and concerns. As such, contemporary Cuban art has become grounded in, but not limited to, popular cultural traditions. At the same time it has featured an eclectic range of formal and technical values and ideological tendencies that have encompassed democratic, anti-imperialist, national, Latin American and international strands.[117]

Contemporary artists' erudite and analytical approaches have combined with their close ties to popular traditions and realities as an organic part of the evolving revolutionary Cuban aesthetic tradition. Their art can be meaningfully read as the creations of Cuban *hombres nuevos* and the new consciousness that Guevara discussed, as an art capable of anticipating and reflecting the concerns of the Cuban people.[118] Contemporary artists share their fellow Cuban citizens' preoccupations with the complexities of contemporary life and they have sought to create art that addresses those issues. In so doing, such artists have been said to represent an "intellectual ferment unprecedented in the history of Cuban culture".[119]

However, no ideological manifestos or official positions dictated how artists should act; they were not politicised in that sense.[120] Artistic endeavours can more fruitfully be seen as the result of the underlying ideological consciousness that has permeated Cuban

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[117] Ibid., 260.
[118] Andrew Salkey, (ed.), *Writing in Cuba since the Revolution*, (London: Bogle-L'Ouverture Publications, 1977), 135.
[119] Sánchez, 57.
[120] Gerardo Mosquera, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, 26 February 2000.

society and that has come to fruition with artists working since the 1980s. Their objective has been to evolve Cuban socialism by attacking what they perceive as its problems — bureaucratisation, corruption and inefficiency — whilst allowing a "Guevarist ethicity" to develop.[121] Consequently, much contemporary Cuban art has functioned in dialogue with the Cuban people toward the betterment of Cuban society and its socialist process. This moral dimension is self-consciously part of the way some artists' in this study in particular envision their artistic mission, especially Bruguera, Ramos and Campos-Pons.

"Hawks and Doves"

The Cuban revolutionary system is fluid and there are all sorts of gaps and areas within it that are not monolithic. The plastic arts sphere is one such area. Indeed, it has been important for *el proceso* to view culture as playing an important role in its revolutionary process. And, the Ministry of Culture and its institutions are renowned in Cuba as having more scope and freedom than the other Ministries, a point which has also applied to many of the people inside these institutions.[122] The power contained within the post–1959 socialist Cuban plastic arts sphere has been diffused on many different levels, governmental, institutional, pedagogical, intellectual and artistic. There have also been opposing streams of thought since 1959 that have affected the trajectory of visual art production. However, these deviations have not been based on a "strict aesthetic credo,"[123] but on ideological divisions at different stages of the revolutionary process, which has caused tension and relative shifts in position that continue to this day.

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[121] Gerardo Mosquera, "The 14 Sons of William Tell," Catalogue (*No Man is an Island: Young Cuban Art*), (Finland: Pori Art Museum, 1990), 42.
[122] Antoni Kapcia, lecture organised by The Institute of Commonwealth Studies, London, 21 November 2003.
[123] Camnitzer, 10.

There have always been "hawks and doves"[124] in Cuba, meaning officials and intellectuals with orthodox or conservative views to those who were/are sympathetic to more liberal, avant-garde strains of socialist thought. One of the complexities of the Cuban situation over the last forty years has been that certain cultural institutions such as ICAIC (Cuban Institute for Cinematographic Art and Industry) and the Casa de las Americas have consistently kept open attitudes. From their set up in the 1960s they have remained havens for the most flexible and open-minded governmental officials (doves). As with other liberal members of government institutions, they have defended constructive critiques of the Cuban revolutionary process produced by controversial artists and intellectuals. Indeed, they have favoured the production of artworks that "raise controversial issues for open public debate in popular dialogues".[125]

Arguably the most important intellectual or 'dove' who positively affected the evolvement of the 1980s art scene was Gerardo Mosquera (b.1945). He has played a key role and he championed the 'new Cuban art' that began to be developed from the late 1970s. In fact, he most probably coined this term to define the series of developments that occurred in Cuba's art production from the late 1970s into the 1990s.[126] He wrote an essay accompanying the catalogue for the original *Volumen Uno* exhibition and his discourse gave expressive form to the new ideas that were being formed and which created an important ideological break with Cuba's post-revolutionary art past. He developed a close relationship with the *Volumen Uno* generation of artists and he was truly interested in what they were doing artistically. At the same time, he began to

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[124] Camnitzer coined this term, 128.

[125] Craven, *Art and Revolution*, 86–89. *El proceso* substantially expanded audiences for the arts and increased the number of people who were actively engaged in performing or producing the arts. This reflects the Revolution's commitment to socialising artistic practice through "cultural democracy" – a common Cuban phrase that refers to the more self-conscious and participatory role Cubans have assumed in the production of culture.

[126] Antonio Eligio Fernández, "The Island, the Map, the Travelers: Notes on recent trends in Cuban Art," *Cuba — Maps of Desire*, ed. Gerald Matt and trans. Heidemarie Markhardt, (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 24.

develop his own ideas about their art and to place these young artists in an increasingly international as opposed to local context, informed by ideas about multi-culturalism and postcolonial studies.[127]

Mosquera saw his intellectual mission as opening up the cultural stagnation that had occurred during the 1970s, and he envisioned the possibility of an art movement that could begin to renovate Cuban culture in general. But on another level, the fact that Mosquera deemed it important to open up Cuban Marxism suggests his deeper social concerns. He was aiming for a less bureaucratic and Soviet-inspired form of communism, which still kept the socialist agenda but in a different way, being more participative, more open and decentralised.[128] A good example of his written influence can be seen in the introduction he wrote for an international exhibition in 1990. He wrote of

> [1980s artists'] "determination to enact socialism and to continue the process that had been set in motion thirty years before". ...[Their art as] the development of a true, independent identity that called on all the legacies of the country to build a present that answered their vision".[129]

What is essential to bear in mind is that the momentous art developments that occurred throughout the 1980s should not be viewed as a mutual banding together of artists and officials deciding together to open new ways and processes in Cuban culture. From his point of view Mosquera saw it as "a constant battle" and one that he feels the artists and academics finally won.[130] He also mentioned that this battle for more openness was achieved because of the appointment of Marcia Leiseca as the Vice-Minister of Culture

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[127] Mosquera interview, 26 February 2000.
[128] Ibid.
[129] Gerardo Mosquera, "The Nearest Edge of the World," Catalogue (*The Nearest Edge of the World: Art and Cuba Now*), (Massachusetts, U.S.: Polarities Inc., 1990), 7
[130] Mosquera interview, 26 February 2000.

in charge of the visual arts in the early 1980s. It was only afterward that the Ministry of Culture became more open.

The value of one person with the potential power to impact Cuban art affairs should therefore not be underestimated.[131] From the late 1970s members of the Cuban intellectual elite were a vital force in the flowering of the plastic arts that followed. 1980s artists relied on the support and nurturing of liberal art intellectuals and institutional and governmental officials such as Leiseca and Mosquera.

Women and the Visual Arts

Marcia Leiseca's appointment highlights a major adaptation to the post–1959 visual art spectrum in Cuba. In this era, the social eliteness associated with professional plastic artists and art production has continued but access to that sphere has widened to include more non-elite sectors of society such as women and Afro-Cubans of popular derivation. Leiseca's role was pivotal to 1980s art developments and her positioning at an institutional level was conducive to a freer and more experimental attitude towards plastic art production. She derived from the liberal art tradition at the Casa de las Americas publishing house in the early 1960s, when the way of working there had been very international and variegated and this ideological orientation stayed with her. She was sympathetic to the 1980s new artistic developments and was instrumental in the promotion of avant-garde artistic endeavours by artists as well as continued official tolerance toward them.

Edith García Buchaca was the first person to hold the position of director of the *Consejo*

[131] Nelson Herrera Ysla, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, 17 February 2000.

Nacional de Cultura. However, aside from García Buchaca and 1950s artist and ENA professor Antonia Eiriz, it was not until the 1980s that Cuban women became noticeably more visible at all levels in the art spectrum. It was a gradual process for the Revolution to shape the role of women in art production. Only two women from the *Volumen Uno* generation (approximately ten per cent) graduated from the ISA in 1981, but from the second 1980s generation onwards there have been more women active in the art sphere, and about twenty five per cent of graduated artists have been female.[132] Therefore, although the women artists discussed in this thesis really can be considered as the products of the Revolution in educational, artistic, pedagogical and ideological terms, they are still in an artistic minority, disproportionate to the demographics of the country.

Yet a number of notable female intellectuals and officials have made important contributions to the plastic arts sphere. Of particular note are Beatriz Aulet, the director of the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales (Centre for the Development of Visual Arts), 1980s artist and ISA professor Consuelo Castañeda (b.1956) and Lupe Alvarez. As a liberal intellectual open to new ideas, Alvarez's most crucial contribution was in a pedagogical capacity during the 1990s, when she was an art history and history of culture theoretician at the ISA. She devised a very thorough course on historically different approaches to art and culture including post-Structuralist theory, the more liberal Marxist scholars and semiotics.[133]

There have also been examples if individuals within the Cuban art establishment who

[132] Camnitzer, 161.
[133] Magdalena Campos-Pons, interview by author, tape recording, Jamaica Plain, Massachusetts, December 1999.

were not supportive (doves) of the new Cuban art during the 1980s. Lillian Llanes was a professor at the ISA and a director of the Centro Wifredo Lam (established in the 1970s as a specialised national centre to advance scholarship in the visual arts). As a traditionally minded, extreme party-liner she initially opposed the radical 1980s artists and their art.[134] However, the interesting point about Llanes relates to her relationship with Mosquera at the Centro Wifredo Lam. Despite her conservative personal aesthetic preferences, Llanes noted that the new young artists received good feedback and criticism at the 1980s Havana biennials, and pragmatically, she allowed Mosquera the opportunity to continue exhibiting these artists in the shows.[135] The biennials, held at the Centro from 1984, were the best showcase for the new art and, through Llanes, Mosquera was placed in a strategic position to provide an official and very visible space for this new art and artists, which brought many international critics and curators into Cuba.[136]

Pedagogy

The system of pedagogy that has developed under the auspices of the revolutionary regime has pre-revolutionary antecedents, but it has become more sophisticated and intrinsic within the Cuban art sphere. Aside from the unique educational experience of the Estudio Libre, Cuban art education pre-revolution had fitted the traditional Latin American archetype and the more prominent artists had not generally taught newer generations.[137] The Cuban pedagogical tradition has expanded beyond its pre–1959 functions, and particularly the success of the ISA and its evolvement during the 1980s profoundly affected the development of the Cuban visual arts pedagogic tradition. The

[134] Mosquera interview 26 February 2000.
[135] Ibid.
[136] Campos-Pons interview.
[137] Camnitzer, 155.

expanded emphasis on pedagogy under the Cuban socialist regime has had implications for the exercise of power by specific individuals as pedagogy and dialectical dialogue between artists and intellectuals has functioned to support and nurture Cuban art developments.

From the early 1960s pedagogy played a prominent role in Cuba, initially at the ENA with seminal 1950s Cuban artists: Martínez, Peña and Eiriz,[138] artists who had participated in the free atmosphere of the early 1960s.[139] Eiriz taught seminal *Volumen Uno* artist Flavio Garcíandia at the ENA, and in turn Garcíandia was deeply influential as an artist and an ISA teacher for future generations. Peña and Martínez also became close to the *Volumen Uno* generation as they provided this first 1980s generation with their own experiences and information.[140] Although they did not formally teach these artists, they were admired as role models because they embodied the Revolution's early artistic ideals and they had looked outside of Cuba to get a broader artistic view.[141]

By the mid–1980s, leading members of the *Volumen Uno* generation such as Garcíandia and José Bedia (b.1959) were placed in teaching positions after they graduated from the ISA. These artists were very talented and it seemed like a natural process for them to teach at the ISA, as there was a dearth of qualified people to teach at this still fairly new institution. Lupe Alvarez played a key role in pushing Garcíandia to become a member of the Communist Party, as in order to effect any real structural or policy changes at the ISA one had to be a member of the official Cuban Communist Party. Garcíandia had

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[138] Antonio Eligio Fernández, "Cuban Art: A Key to the Gulf and How to Use it," Catalogue (*No Man is an Island*), (Finland: Pori Art Museum, 1990), 67.
[139] Mosquera interview, 17 February 2000.
[140] Ibid.

[141] Flavio Garcíandia, interview by author, tape recording, Monterrey, Mexico, 3 March 2000.

been ignorant of the fact that in the Cuban socialist governing structure every decision concerning the ISA faculty had to be approved in a meeting of the Communist Party. Once 'inside' he realised that it was impossible to do anything if one was not there.[142] As testimony to this, once a member of the Communist Party, Garcíandia and his peers managed, from their official teaching positions, to enact real changes within the institution. They also brought a number of other young artists and intellectuals into the faculty who reflected their concerns about the Cuban art scene.[143] The importance of being inside the official Cuban Communist Party to effect changes indicates the boundaries of working within the Cuban art system post–1959. It is also informative as to ways in which socialist ideals have impacted the structure of the plastic arts spectrum and the role of pedagogy within it.

There was thus a transition in the 1980s ISA from an old guard, conservative faculty with Soviet teachers and a strong pedagogical influence from the Russian Academy. As students, Garcíandia, Bedia et al had disliked the 'old' ISA curricula and privately mocked the teaching methods and ideologies of these Soviet teachers, whom they did not respect as either artists or professors.[144] The new faculty appointments led to a rigorous new pedagogical approach developing with curriculum and methodological changes and the implementation of new objectives at the ISA.[145]

Garcíandia was a very important figure in the 1980s Cuban art scene. He was the main source behind the introduction of the strong conceptual approach to teaching at the ISA,

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[142] Ibid.
[143] Ibid. The new faculty members included José Bedia, Consuelo Castañeda and Osvaldo Sánchez.
[144] Ibid. Garcíandia asked Camnitzer not to mention this in his book because the young Cuban artists did respect their Soviet teachers as people and did not wish to hurt their feelings.
[145] Ibid. One of the things they were unable to alter was the structuring from three departments — cultural, printmaking and painting - into one faculty.

and he has been of direct pedagogical importance for some of the artists discussed in this thesis. As a very articulate thinker, he was able to assimilate many ideas for future 1980s generations in his role as a professor.[146] He made valuable contributions to the developing Cuban art scene by introducing hard to obtain information about international art trends.[147] His aim was to make his students aware of what was going on in the art world and to look outside Cuba,[148] just as had happened during the early 1960s at the ENA.

A pertinent example concerns Marta María Pérez and her use of Afro-Cuban themes, which were not considered as acceptable subject matter in the early 1980s. As her supervisor, Garcíandia introduced and encouraged Pérez to explore a conceptual approach, which in her case related to Afro-Cuban themes and photography in her constructions of Cuban identity.[149] Yet Pérez encountered strong resistance and opposition to her choice of black and white photography from the Soviet teachers and other conservative ISA faculty members during her studies (1979–1984). Officially her work was deemed too idealist and not materialist enough. The old guard teachers wanted to give her the lowest grades possible because she was working in the medium of photography and utilising elements of religion, superstition and popular culture in her work.

However, by the mid-1980s, the new wave of ISA teachers and artists had begun to challenge the pre-existing system in order to make advances in art education and production. The situation soon began to change; Afro-Cuban themes became accepted

[146] Campos-Pons interview.
[147] Antonio Eligio Fernández, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, 23 February 2000.
[148] Garcíandia interview.
[149] Ibid.

subject matter and the majority of the Soviet teachers returned home, having been replaced by Cuban artists and intellectuals.

The pedagogical system operating at the ISA has also evolved so that students taught by members of previous ISA art generations have been encouraged to break with existing art traditions and experiment. Once they have graduated from the ISA, they are themselves placed in teaching positions at the institution to encourage the continuation of this process with their students. It is a radical and avant-garde concept that has encouraged the challenging of established art practices and has stimulated vibrant new developments. However, this system of pedagogy has also nurtured and propelled a system of artistic exclusivity, as it is predominantly artists from this highly esteemed institution that become members of the Cuban plastic arts elite, with such artists more likely to achieve international success and recognition.

In a sense, this pedagogical situation could be construed as rather insular, as only students who have actually attended the ISA are allowed to teach there, thus perpetuating the eliteness surrounding that institution and those that study there. The example of another *Volumen Uno* artist, Juan Francisco Elso Padilla (1956–1988) highlights the negative side of the elitist approach at the ISA. Although he was nationally and internationally recognised as an extremely talented artist, Padilla was not able to teach at the ISA because he had not studied there. Despite this setback, he still proved to be an important pedagogical figure for future art generations, including Tania Bruguera.

Elso was a very influential figure for Bruguera and the trajectory her artistic endeavours would take. As her elementary school art teacher, Elso had a profound influence on her, in a place she considers as "the most important school for me".[150] Moreover, Bruguera continued to seek his pedagogical advice during her studies at the ISA, and afterwards they developed a firm friendship until his premature death in the late 1980s. In her opinion, he was the best artist in Cuba during the 1980s and one of the best in general.[151] Universally considered as one of the truly innovative and most gifted of the *Volumen Uno* generation of artists, the ideas that concerned Elso overlap the issues that have preoccupied Bruguera and he influenced the way in which she conceives of art. This connection derives from the idea that art has to be completely linked with life and as alive as possible, in order to help heal one's own problems, or to help others to reflect and think about certain subjects. Although in formal terms their work has not been related.

Ultimately, the Cuban visual arts pedagogical system is unique and perhaps helps to explain the strong bonds from art generation to art generation. Garcíandia is a good example of this. In addition to being a seminal *Volumen Uno* figure, as Head of the Painting Department at the ISA, he also assumed much responsibility as a mediator between the art students and the governing bodies during the late 1980s. At that time his position was a precarious one; ISA officials wanted Garcíandia to control the students whilst the students wanted him to grant them more freedom. What is poignant is that Garcíandia felt stuck in the middle of this situation, but ultimately, his loyalty

[150] Tania Bruguera, interview by author, tape recording, New York, 9 December 1999.
[151] Ibid.

rested with the students because he was a practising artist and he felt in the same position as them.[152]

The mass exodus of Cuban artists and intellectuals since the late 1980s has affected the visual arts. Contemporary artists like Garcíandia and Bedia are now spread in many geographical areas with the dialogue and pedagogy between generations having been severed, physically and psychologically. By the 1990s, most 1980s artists had left and established themselves outside of Cuba. The pedagogical system has continued in Cuba with artists still graduating and teaching at the ISA and the methodological principles developed there during the 1980s have not been overturned. But an artistic vacuum has been left by the lost 1980s generations and, along with wider ideological and societal changes, this has had an effect.

The 1980s energy and dialogue within the ISA reflected what was happening outside and vice versa, but this real system of communication no longer functions to the same extent. This has affected the quality of the education in the ISA, as there are now fewer possibilities to establish a dialogue and gain access to other opinions and different discourses about what is occurring within Cuban culture. From the viewpoint of female and Afro-Cuban artists, who have always been an artistic minority in proportionate terms, this has lessened the possibilities for their viewpoints to be heard and have an impact within the artistic and social community. This situation is not the fault of those still teaching at the ISA, rather, it should be seen as a general reflection of the difficulties facing contemporary Cuban society.[153]

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[152] Garcíandia interview.
[153] Fernández interview.

There are, however, discreet signs of improvement in this situation. Despite the enforced schism in the pedagogical and dialogical system between contemporary Cuban art generations, a group of artists recently working with Rene Francisco at the ISA, known collectively as "Galería DUPP," have invited Garcíandia to be involved with some of their projects. I consider that this demonstrates the keenness on the part of current art students to maintain the pedagogical and ideological link with key artistic figures and ideas from recent Cuban art history, despite geographical and temporal separation. Moreover, it reinforces Gerardo Mosquera's argument put forward in an article he wrote in the early 1990s, in which the title referred to the fact that artists post–1990s, or the "*mala yerba*" were still growing. His point was that in accordance with the structure and mechanisms of the Cuban art sphere and its institutions, this system would continue to churn out artists who continue the process of challenging the system.

After the schism and upheavals that have occurred in the visual arts spectrum over the last decade, the efforts of Francisco and Galería DUPP are encouraging and can be viewed as a reflection of the changed political and economic situation presently facing Cuban artists. It is now commonplace for successful, internationally known Cuban artists from the 1990s generations to spend time living and studying outside of Cuba, as well as exhibiting overseas. Many of these artists remain based in Cuba, so they have a sense of being in and out of Cuba as dual existential possibilities, enabling them to communicate with Cuban artists on and off island. These factors affect the immediate concerns of this paper, because issues of contemporary social, cultural and economic realities, displacement and dialogue are extremely pertinent for considering notions of Cuban identity and are among the fundamental problems that have been addressed in these women's art.

The Cuban plastic arts spectrum is unique and has been nurtured as part of the evolution of Cuba's specific socialist process to create the ground for a fertile, innovative and critically questioning contemporary plastic arts sphere. As examples of Guevara's *hombres nuevos*, contemporary artists have been placed in special societal positions to assess and contemplate the social, ideological and cultural issues affecting Cuba and its revolutionary process. Artists' creative endeavours have derived from their personal experiences within a framework of ideas provided by a range of sources: non-heterodox socialist ideologies, international avant-garde art developments and the historic Cuban social, cultural and artistic tradition.[154] Cuba has taken what it deemed necessary for its own artistic revolutionary process in combination with the country's pre-existing art historical tradition. Latin American socialist aesthetic ideas have been selectively appropriated to the Cuban artistic tradition, in keeping with Mariátegui's proposals for artistic endeavour within a socialist process.

Pedagogy has been central to the unique trajectory of Cuban art practice post–1959. Art intellectuals, officials, artists and teachers have been placed in powerful positions to be able to nurture, curtail and/or censor the arts through the decades, depending on their personal ideological leanings. This active participation by specific individuals has been a decisive factor in determining the trajectory that Cuban visual art production within the revolutionary process. This highlights that the power structure surrounding the Cuban visual arts has not been unidirectional but subject to various ideological influences. The result of the Cuban system is a level of institutional, ideological, educational and pedagogical support that has nurtured artistic experimentation since the 1980s and the development of future artists and art production.

[154] Michael Z. Wise, "Tweaking the Beard of the Maximum Leader," *New York Times*, 12 June 1994, sec. H, p. 36.

Chapter Three

Gender, Race and Religion

Artists, like everyone else, live in historical socio-cultural realms that shape their worldviews and inform their art productions. Therefore, leading on from the previous chapters' examination of the plastic arts sphere and the socialist aesthetic and ideological realm, this chapter will consider gender, race and religion in Cuba in the pre- and post–1959 eras. As artists and visual art production are affected by these socio-cultural issues. Furthermore, the use of Afro-Cuban themes, pre- and post–1959, provides a form of continuity in the plastic arts field, that informs about notions of Cuban identity and how issues of marginality intersect with gender and race concerns.

Advancements in sexual, racial and social equality since the advent of the revolutionary process have relevance to this study, particularly in the case of African-derived Magdalena Campos-Pons and Belkis Ayón, as all the women in this study have been born, grown up and trained as artists within that overarching framework. The defence of equal rights for all human beings were a key principle of the 1959 Revolution and Cuban women in the post–1959 era have participated and advanced in every sphere of Cuba's political, economic, social and cultural life. In education too, there has been female involvement at every level of study and as a growing percentage of the Cuban workforce.

Before the Cuban Revolution, women and Afro-Cubans had been among the most marginalised sections of Cuban society. There were far fewer females and Afro-Cubans

included in the visual arts sphere and far less opportunities open to them in art education. In the post–1959 era some women have been placed in key positions in the visual arts and the historical backdrop begins to illustrate how the Marxist-Leninist mandate has affected Cuban gender and race constructions. For instance, being born and educated in the period of the Revolution has helped Afro-Cuban female artists such as Ayón and Campos-Pons to cross social and race boundaries because of the status and opportunities available to them as professional Cuban artists. However, although huge strides have been made in respect to race and gender issues in the post-revolutionary period, it would be naïve to believe that race, class and social divides no longer exist in Cuba. There are still deep-seated internalised racist opinions and plenty of vestiges of *machismo* evident within Cuban society.

Feminism

Feminism is not a singular approach vis-à-vis the plastic arts sphere, but a broad umbrella term for a diverse number of positions and strategies amongst certain women involved in the production, distribution and consumption of art. As such there are numerous issues, debates and voices within the western Feminist movement, as discussed by authors like Katy Deepwell, Griselda Pollock, Mary Kelly, Lucy Lippard, Linda Nochlin and Hilary Robinson that have relevance to my interpretation of these female Cuban artists and their work.

Feminism as a movement, in terms of organisation, ideologies and membership, was never strong in Cuba having emerged in Havana among university professors, writers, journalists and some female political leaders in the 1920s. Yet, aside from the right to vote, the members and demands of the Feminist Congresses in the 1920s and 1930s

were eminently elitist and bourgeois, and the movement declined during the 1940s and 1950s.[155]

In the contemporary Cuban context, Feminism and its ideals have been perceived as a limiting platform from which to produce art and be labelled. Perhaps it is a reflection of Cuban revolutionary advances made in the field of gender equality that has inspired these artists not to want to underline any overt gender distinctions. They consider themselves equal to their male counterparts and are happy to be associated with their male colleagues, as fellow Cuban artists. Language also feeds into this cross-cultural discussion, as the Spanish term for gender, *genero*, is a problematic one in Latin America, as the term has multiple connotations. This points to a poor cultural fit between Latin American and U.S./European variants of concepts of Feminism.[156]

In the context of western female art production, the work of the artists in this study could lead to their being referred to as "Feminist artists," yet they have all rejected associations between themselves and western movements. Whilst discussing some issues concerning Feminism with a contemporary male Cuban artist, he mentioned that Cuban female artists do not wish to be associated with the label of Feminism as it is considered in Cuba to be just another group organisation.[157] This is an important point to bear in mind, as these Cuban female artists have all been born and educated within a socialist framework, and this is a valid reason why the idea of a group collective has not held much appeal to them.

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[155]Louis Pérez Jr., *Cuba: Between Reform and Revolution*, 2d ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 238, 247.
[156] In Spanish the term "Genero" is a masculine noun that, in addition to meaning gender can refer to the class or type of something - genus, a genre, cloth, stuff or material. See Debra Castillo, *Talking Back — Towards a Latin American Feminist Literary Criticism*, (New Jersey: Cornell University Press, 1992), 312.
[157] Ordo Amoris, conversation with the author, Barbican Arts Centre, London, May 1999.

In the former USSR there was also a general distrust of Feminism as a political grouping,[158] just as there has been similar reservations about Feminism in contemporary Cuba. Perhaps Cuban female artists have rejected such a connection because they already exist in a society that has upheld notions of communal practice and activities as part of everyday life. It is important to remember that an essential goal of the Cuban revolutionary process has been to work toward equality in racial, social and gender terms. Therefore, associations with what Feminism represents for women in a societal sense have been perceived differently in Cuba. The negative reaction by the artists in this study to the notion that they are Feminists or that their art be labelled 'Feminist art' relates to the formation of a politicised identity that they wholeheartedly reject. This can reveal something about the social and cultural structuring of the Cuban psyche. Rather than incorrectly labelling any of the artists in this study as Feminist artists, it would be more appropriate to consider their art production as informed by different 'feminisms'. This is meaningful in understanding their identities, horizons and the socio-cultural context(s) in which they have produced art.

Unlike Feminist theory and practice in the U.S./European context, which has been perceived by western women as a liberating phenomenon, Feminism in Cuba has been perceived by these women as a conscious collective group ethos, stifling to individual creativity, reflecting their specific socio-historic perspective. Yet these artists have, and continue to work from personal perspectives that can be associated with Feminist postures, though they lack a programme and Feminist self-awareness. Moreover, the proposals of feminine discourse present in the contemporary Cuban plastic arts world

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[158] Joanna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 78.

have embraced a spectrum of subject matter that extends beyond the concerns of gender alone.

Particularly for Campos-Pons, Pérez and Ayón, they were part of the 1980s generations of artists who were intent on reshaping the Cuban cultural landscape. Their feminine perspectives on Cuban reality sought to genuinely convey an impression of the circumstances of their lives and contexts. Their art production brought to the fore their preoccupations of existential, cultural, sexual and religious issues, as well as critically questioning aspects of Cuban life. Indeed, it is fair to say that all the artists in this study have sought to explore ideas about what being Cuban means to them and to develop visual languages that have corresponded to their notions of self-perception and their socio-cultural realities.

Tania Bruguera's comments are poignant in this regard. During a recent discussion group with other artists in New York,[159] Bruguera stated that she felt more of a connection with post-Soviet Bloc artists than she did with Latin American ones. She joked that "we have the same bad cars," but underlying her light-hearted comment about the economic and material realities of living in a communist society, I believe there are serious reasons for this statement. It is likely that Bruguera has felt more of a general and ideological connection with post-Soviet and post-Eastern Bloc artists as fellow citizens of communist states, rather than because of stylistic or artistic connections with specific works or artists in these regions.

[159] Tania Bruguera, panel discussion organised by ArtTable Inc., The Kitchen, New York, 7 December 2000.

Like Bruguera and other contemporary artists in Cuba, artists based in the post-Soviet and Eastern Bloc countries have had to adapt to the same kind of market conditions that have occurred in Cuba in the 1990s, despite their socialist upbringing and education. Cuban and Soviet/Eastern Bloc artists have had to live through ideological, economic and political crises. They have had to adapt from communist governmental and ideological structures to ones that have incorporated capitalist ideas. These similarities in lived experience may account for the heightened sense of affinity Bruguera feels with artists from former Soviet/Eastern Bloc states rather than with Latin American ones.

Afro-Cuban Religions

The worldviews, philosophies and values of the Afro-Cuban cultural components have historically played an important role in the ethnogenesis of Cuba and the way this culture identifies itself. Thus African cultural contributions are an undeniably important consideration for any definition of Cuban identity and have been consciously considered in the work of some post–1980 artists. As these artistic generations re-engaged with Afro-Cuban religious-cultural elements in their work as representational strategies reflective of their socio-cultural identities.

The artists in this thesis have drawn upon three specific Afro-Cuban traditions: *Santería, Palo Monte* and *Abakuá* (see Glossary). Although none of them are or have been active religious practitioners, these religions have formed fundamental elements of the majority of their worldviews, as they are an integral presence within Cuban life. As such, Afro-Cuban motifs and practices should also be viewed as forms of popular culture as well as purely religious. In order to be made into popular culture a practice or commodity must bear the interests of the ordinary people. Popular culture is not consumption, it is the

living, active process of generating and circulating meanings and/or pleasures within a social system, a process which can only be developed from within, not imposed from above.[160] In the Cuban context, popular culture has denoted quotidian traditions associated with the popular classes; folklore, myths, sayings, superstitions, songs, dances, Afro-Cuban traditions, Chinese customs, Spiritism, *picuo* and folk Catholic practices.

After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the political motivation to actively attempt to develop a sense of Cuban identity was nourished by Cuban revolutionary nationalism during the early 1960s, and this backdrop, the "will to national transformation" depended on defining and bonding the notions of culture and nation.[161] The Cuban revolutionary government understood that Afro-Cuban components and other popular cultural traditions were essential to the social and cultural make-up of their society. Yet Afro-Cuban rituals placed the Cuban government in a precarious situation. On the one hand, they were viewed as non-materialist and non-socialist customs that could potentially slow down the achievement of the new socialist society. On the other, they were understood to be integral to and historically validated components of Cuban cultural make-up that needed to be nurtured in order to achieve the possibility of a true Cuban identity.[162] Indeed, in an historical and contemporary sense, Afro-Cuban religious ceremonies have had the aim of controlling the powers driving the Cuban social

[160] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 23.
[161] Osvaldo Sánchez, "The Last of the Moderns," Catalogue (*Cuba: La Isla Posible*), (Spain: Ediciones Destino, 1995), 250.
[162] Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1994), 357.

environment.[163] One observer has even commented that *Santería* has a stronger hold on Cuba than either Catholicism or Castro's Marxism-Leninism.[164]

Therefore, to a degree, Afro-Cuban religious traditions and practices have been given public recognition under the revolutionary regime, as integral elements of Cuban national and cultural ancestry. Yet African-derived religious practices in general represent closed sets of cultural rituals that are at odds with a Marxist historical process of societal transformation.[165] There was thus a lack of endorsement for the artistic use of popular culture in the late 1960s/1970s and religious practices were officially restricted. Specifically the Afro-Cuban secret brotherhood *Abakuá* was deemed as particularly undermining to the ideals of the Cuban regime, as it is by nature an esoteric religious grouping: elitist, hierarchical, secretive and open only to males.

Whilst religious practice of any type has not been officially permitted under the Cuban revolutionary government, it was practised in secret and it was not until the 1980s that Afro-Cuban and other popular themes began to be utilised by artists. By this time religious practice in general had begun to become ever more popular and accepted practice in Cuba. The immense political and economic problems in Cuba caused by the continuing U.S. imposed trade embargo and the demise of the Soviet Union have been considered major contributing factors to this increase, in combination with a more open

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[163] Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, "Maps of Desire," *Cuba — Maps of Desire*, ed. Gerald Matt, trans. Bernhard Höfele (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 153.
[164] Hugh O'Shaughnessy, "Revolutionary Class of '59," *Observer Magazine*, 2 April 1989, p. 27.
[165] David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America 1910–1990*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 94.

and lenient governmental attitude. Although, in relation to the *Abakuá*, the society remains closed and with a violent reputation, restricting knowledge and access to its members only.

Martí and *Mestizaje*

This discussion on Cuban identity must take on board the discourses of José Martí (1853–1895) because of the pivotal role he has played in the destiny of the Cuban nation and the importance of his ideas in the formation of Cuban nation building throughout this century. Gifted politically and as a poet, Martí combined these talents to produce a unique contribution to the positive ideological discourse concerning Cuban nation building. He coined certain terms in the service of cultural nationalism, discourses that became synonymous with Cuban identity, in particular "*mestizaje*" (see Glossary).

His 1891 publication *Nuestra América (Our America)* set out his manifesto of *mestizaje*, in which he stated that "there could be no racial hate in Cuba as there were no races".[166] His reasoning behind this statement lay in the fact that Cuba has inherited the specific character of belonging both to the West and the non-West. The island's religious and cultural complexes combine a mix of Catholic and Mediterranean customs, West and Central African religious and cultural practices and Chinese curses,[167] which have been shaped into uniquely Cuban concepts. African concepts were modified from their origins in the process of re-adaptation and reconstruction in their New World contexts. The African people transported from disparate parts of West and Central Africa did not

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[166] José Martí, *Nuestra América*, ed. Gonzalo de Quesada (Havana: Imprenta y Papelería de Rambla y Bouza, 1909), 82,85,90.
[167] Osvaldo Sánchez, "José Bedia - Restoring our Otherness," *Third Text* 13 (1991): 64.

preserve their cultures as intact entities, but nor did they form entirely new ones either. Catholic and *Yoruba*-derived ideas mixed together, as did *Kongo* and other African concepts too, which led to the emergence of certain hybrid forms and practices.

However, in their basic underlying structure, philosophy, ritual and practices, Afro-Cuban religious traditions have remained close to their African roots and as a result these African-derived practices have survived in Cuba with a particular strength and purity.[168] In this regard Cuban anthropologist Fernando Ortíz's classic remark of comparing Cuban culture as a paradigm of "*ajiaco*"[169] — a rich stew of different ingredients cooked until it makes a broth of synthesis, in which some core ingredients remain undissolved — is very apt. Moreover, *mestizaje* has occurred not only in racial terms but also in cultural terms, in the sense of the hybrid development of memories and the amalgamation of traditions,[170] and it has been a significant part of what constitutes Cuba as a nation.

Martí and his ideals became an ideological cornerstone of the Cuban revolutionary process.[171] The 1959 Revolution institionalised and officialised Martí's narrative about Cuban identity, nation and *mestizaje*. The idea of nationhood was privileged because of the complex mixing of many types of people in the Cuban context and revolutionary Afro-Cuban Poet Laureate Nicolas Guillén referred to this when he discussed the need to talk about the "*color cubano*". Guillén was chosen as the Revolution's Poet Laureate

[168] In particular this applies to *Yoruba*-derived practices, as the *Yoruba* constituted the most recent and massive arrival of slaves, occurring predominantly in the late nineteenth century. See Pierre Verger, *Trade Relations between the Bight of Benin and Bahia from the 17th to 19th Century*, (Ibadan: Ibadan University Press, 1976), 1–10.

[169] Fernando Ortíz, "Los factores humanos de la cubanidad," *Orbita de Fernando Ortíz*, (Havana: Ediciones Unión, 1973), 154–157.

[170] Nelly Richard, "Chile, Women and Dissidence," *Beyond the Fantastic: Contemporary Art Criticism from Latin America*, ed. Gerardo Mosquera (London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1995), 139.

[171] Gabriel García Márquez, "Fidel - The Craft of the word," *An Encounter with Fidel*, Gianni Minà (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1991), 16.

as his poetry in general was a discourse of racial pride in which the dual African and European heritage of Cuba had to be celebrated.[172]

There is also an essential historicity to the way the Cuban revolutionary experience is linked to Martí within the contemporary Cuban psyche. Martí had been read, appreciated and utilised by the Cuban intelligentsia since the 1920s and by the 1950s his memory began to act as a catalyst within Cuban intellectual consciousness. The 1950s 26th July movement led by Castro identified semantically and ideologically with Martí by reviving his ideologies, and by doing so, the movement sought to invoke Cuban history.[173] This was the essential ideological baggage that accompanied the 1959 Revolution and Cubans today see this revolution as the one that achieved independence, completing the struggle that Martí began in the nineteenth century.[174]

Martí is therefore considered a national symbol, ubiquitous in the Cuban mindset and viewed as the founding figure of Cuba. As such, his ideas have permeated contemporary Cuban consciousness. Cuban schoolchildren study his works, and in an officially non-religious country like Cuba he is considered the "spiritual father of the people, particularly to Cuban intellectuals".[175] Martí viewed the role of the intellectual in society as "a teacher and a seeker of the truth who foments the creation of consciousness".[176] His views suggest that he saw a valuable ethical and social

[172] Examples from his large poetic corpus include "Balada de los dos Abuelos" (Ballad of Two Grandfathers); "Tengo" (I have) (1964).
[173] Antoni Kapcia, "Cuban populism and the birth of the myth of Martí," *Jose Martí: Revolutionary Democrat*, eds., Christopher Abel and Nissa Torrents (London: Athlone Press, 1986), 32–33. 26th July was José Martí's birthday.
[174] Pérez Jr., 316–317.
[175] Camnitzer, 73.
[176] John M. Kirk, "Jose Martí and his concept of the *intelectual comprometido*," *Jose Martí: Revolutionary Democrat*, eds., Christopher Abel and Nissa Torrents (London: Athlone Press, 1986), 111, quoting Julio Le Riverend.

dimension to the activities of intellectuals.[177] This indicates overlaps between Martí's ideals and those of Mariátegui and Guevara, in relation to the role plastic artists can play within society. The compatibility of these seemingly disparate individuals' ideas has been borne out in the Cuban plastic arts sphere and is apparent in the way contemporary artists, including those in this study, perceive themselves and are perceived to be valued intellectual producers within society.

Race

In relation to the notion of *mestizaje* and Afro-Cuban religions, even for Cubans who are not active practitioners of these religions, the concepts are known and meaningful, irrespective of one's ethnicity or skin colour in Cuba. Four of the artists in this thesis have utilised African-derived themes yet all do not have African ancestry, which suggests that the use of such cultural manifestations runs deeper than skin colour or race issues. This facet of Cuban identity and art practice differs from other contexts such as the North American one for example.

In the U.S., the use of African-derived themes and beliefs seems to be restricted to those Americans who appear to be phenotypically of African descent, as a way of expressing their distinct heritage not shared by other U.S. citizens. The designation "African-American artists" refers to a specific sector of that society who utilises African-derived themes in their art practice as a means of representing their identity as African-derived. In the U.S. context it has been only African-Americans who have felt able to

[177] Some scholars have incorrectly sought to define Martí as a socialist. Whilst the ideologies of Martí can be located close to Marxism, the relationship between Martí's thought and Marxism is complex and requires careful thought and rigorous definition. See Jorge Ibarra, "Martí and socialism," *José Martí: Revolutionary Democrat*, eds., Christopher Abel and Nissa Torrents (London: Athlone press, 1986), 83–107.

draw upon African-derived concepts and motifs in their art, as elements that are representative of their racial identity and heritage.

The situation in Cuba is markedly different. Cuban culture is *mulato* in many of its forms and, unlike the U.S. context, the use of Afro-Cuban themes has not been based on one's phenotypic African origins. Therefore, the use of Afro-Cuban themes should not be viewed as something exclusive to just African-derived Cubans; instead, Afro-Cuban themes are deemed as part of something common and accessible to all Cubans. However, this does not mean that the use of Afro-Cuban themes has not intersected with notions of race and ethnicity in the Cuban context. To some degree they have. But it means that African cultural contributions are important elements that must be considered in any general discussion about Cuban identity.

Despite the ability by Cuban artists to utilise African-derived themes and practices, there are race and ethnic issues to consider, as Afro-Cuban people have suffered and continue to suffer marginalisation within Cuban society. That has been the legacy of slavery in Cuba and the long history of exclusion. The much quoted phrase "not black, not white, Cuban" of José Martí, the nineteenth century Cuban independence hero is still utilised by the Cuban government, but the reality is that Cuba is not a paradise of racial harmony, racial prejudices run deep. The jury is still out on the impact of *el proceso* on Cuban race relations, but official sources and some observers claim that racism has been eradicated in the revolutionary period, although there have also been some counter claims by black nationalists.[178]

[178] John Burdick, "The Myth of Racial Democracy," *Report on the Americas* XXV, no. 4 (1992): 41.

The revolutionary euphoria surrounding the 1959 Revolution was a key moment in Cuba's history when levels of social unity and cohesion were achieved that could bridge social divides. Many blacks and *mulatos* developed a sense of rightful belonging to the Cuban nation that transcended racial divisions and developed out of the historical legacy of national resistance in Cuba.[179] Moreover, in 1959 Castro denounced racial discrimination and prejudice as "anti-nation," and by the 1970s he had defined Cubans as a "Latin-African" people".[180] Most observers of contemporary Cuba concur that the 1959 Revolution did eliminate the visible, legal pillars of racism and it enjoyed the support of poor blacks and *mulatos*. However, the revolutionary government declared its own version of racial democracy, making race and racism taboo subjects, and no race-based (or any other for that matter) political movements have been allowed to emerge.[181]

African cultural contributions are essential ingredients and components within Cuban culture that have played a fundamental role in the construction of identity for many Cuban artists dating from the pre–1959 era. All Cubans have had the uninhibited right to draw from the same pool of cultural beliefs, which includes African derived ones and contemporary Cuban plastic artists have felt free to choose openly from a variety of traditions. Thus the use of African-derived religious and cultural traditions, beliefs and iconography in Cuba has not been solely related to one's upbringing, social class and education. Cuban artists have a multiple heritage from which to draw upon, irrespective of their ethnic derivation.

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[179] Pedro Pérez Sarduy and Jean Stubbs, eds., " The Rite of Social Communion," *Afro-Cuba: An Anthology of Cuban Writing on Race, Politics, and Culture*, (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 1993), 7–8.
[180] Ibid., 6.
[181] Burdick, 44.

However, familiarity with Afro-Cuban practices and concepts has not been a universal context equally understood and accepted by everybody within Cuban society. Whilst some contemporary artists have chosen to draw upon Afro-Cuban themes in their creative endeavours because it is meaningful to their artistic explorations, philosophical understandings and beliefs and/or conscious self-perception, others have not. The important point to bear in mind is that this situation has not correlated with the colour of one's skin but has been influenced by a whole range of factors from their personal realities, worldviews and interest in such concepts, to upbringing and exposure. For example, 'white' or 'Hispano' Cuban artist, Marta María Pérez was not personally exposed to an environment of Afro-Cuban religious practice, but Afro-Cuban traditions and beliefs have formed the fundamental core of her artistic practice. Similarly, 'black' artist, Magdalena Campos-Pons did grow up in a familial environment surrounded by Afro-Cuban practices, but she chose not to focus on those elements in her early art production in Cuba during the 1980s.

Moreover, the issue is not how to classify 'black' or 'white' as identity categorisations, but to recognise societal perceptions of the many shades of black, brown and white that exist in Cuba. The racial colour coding of the concepts of black and white have not been perceived in Cuba as they have been in the UK or the U.S. because of Cuba's particular socio-cultural history. There are also sociological implications in terms of racial designation in the plastic arts spectrum.

For the African-derived artists in this study, issues of gender, race and ethnicity have been important in their work and self-perceptions. And, within Cuba's artistic mechanisms there are still very few female artists of colour, a disproportionately low

amount that does not truly reflect Cuban demographics. Even by the mid–1980s, only one quarter of the ISA student intake was female, and of those Campos-Pons was the only Afro-Cuban woman, and she was acutely aware of being the only one studying at the ISA during this time. Whilst Ayón, like Campos-Pons, is Afro-Cuban, Campos-Pons would be classed a *negra* (*black woman*), whereas Ayón would be considered a *mulata* (*women with varying shades of brown skin*).[182] The evidence in the Cuban context suggests that the 'whitening' effect has continued to be an active part of Cuban social and cultural reality. Thus greater social mobility has been associated with how light one's skin is, indicating that the notion of *mestizaje* still seems to be a problematic one in Cuban society. Moreover it is telling that, despite the evident interracial mix in Cuba, dark skins and mixed race relationships are considered socially undesirable,[183] which Campos-Pons discovered for herself in the late 1980s.

Within the wider art system, female officials and intellectuals such as Lillian Llanes, Marcia Leiseca, Beatriz Aulet, Lupe Alvarez and Consuelo Castañeda would not be considered as Afro-Cubans or black Cubans. This is not to say that they do not have any African blood, some definitely do. However, in physical terms they appear to be closer to the racial categorisation white or Hispano Cuban than to any other, but the racial categorisation 'white' does not adequately designate them either. What is clear is that it is difficult to talk of any form of racial purity, whether in phenotypical or socio-cultural terms in the Cuban context.[184]

[182] Gerardo Mosquera, conversation with the author, annual conference of the Association of Art Historians, Liverpool, 6 April 2002.
[183] Sarduy and Stubbs, 11.
[184] Ibid., 15.

Therefore, although the issue of race is not the sole or even the most important consideration for a definition of Cuban identity, this topic can illuminate with regard to notions of Cuban self-perception for some artists in this study. Furthermore, the use of African-derived themes can be read as historical and contemporary markers of identity, as signifiers of a desire to express notions of being Cuban.

Afro-Cuban Movement

Afro-Cuban practices and themes have had a long and chequered history in Cuba, and the changing discourse about African-derived peoples and culture since the late nineteenth century has been entwined within the polemics concerning Cuban national identity. European *Costumbrista* artists based in nineteenth century Cuba such as Frédéric Mialhe (1810–1881) and Víctor Patricio Landaluze (1828–1889) drew on popular Cuban themes and traditions. They constructed exoticised portrayals of Cuban land and seascapes, to present picturesque images of quotidian life, as they were in demand in Europe at that time. Similarly, Afro-Cuban practice, costumes and carnivals were portrayed in the context of the cultural curio. For instance, Landaluze's *Tipos y Costumbres* publication documented the varied 'types' of Afro-Cubans, such as detailed *ireme* figures, which were depicted in a very realistic manner.[185] But these images did not reflect the reality of life for Afro-Cuban people, as they were mostly idealised portrayals depicting happy, submissive slaves, content to work in the sugar mills and plantations and *mulatas* as cheerful Venus-like characters **[Fig.1]**.

By the 1920s, intellectuals involved in the Afro-Cuban movement, active from 1920s-

[185] Víctor Patricio Landaluze, "Tipos y Costumbres de la Isla de Cuba," *Coleccion de Artículos* 50, intro. Antonio Bachiller y Morales (Havana: Miguel de Villa, 1881).

1940s, began to explore African-derived and other popular themes in poetry, the visual arts, music, dance, literature, history and anthropology. The growth of Afro-Cubanism was directly related to Cuba's need for economic, political and cultural survival, which led to the solidification of nationalist sentiment in the face of mounting U.S. pressures.[186] The quest was to establish what being Cuban meant through visual and other discursive formats in the context of Cuban nationalism, identity and the transformation of Cuba's cultural horizons.

Intellectuals such as the *Grupo Minorista* (1923–1928) utilised Martí's ideals to define an essential Cubanness and they were dedicated to socio-political reforms and the promotion of the arts and culture.[187] The Afro-Cuban movement as a whole was geared towards Cuban nation building and establishing a Cuban identity. The *Grupo* advocated the development of an "*arte vernaculo*" (*vernacular/popular art*) and they sponsored the groundbreaking 1927 "New Art exhibition".[188] They recognised the value of depicting the Cuban nation as ethnically and culturally mixed and their support of the Cuban Modernists acted as a catalyst for profound change by emphasising Afro-Cuban and folkloric contributions, leading to the different treatment of these themes in all the arts.

Yet despite these developments taking place the Cuban Academy did not follow suit. The Cuban Academy or the Academia de San Alejandro art school was the most prestigious art school in Cuba, which followed a model validated by western European standards. Artists trained at San Alejandro did not use Afro-Cuban and other popular

[186] Pérez, Jr., 150.
[187] Kapcia, 41–42.
[188] Pérez, Jr., 237.

themes; they studied conventional European styles and themes,[189] as this institution did not allow for the cultural validation of Cuban ethnic and popular traditions.[190]

Ideologically, San Alejandro disliked the Cuban Modernist movement, viewing its "modern art" as subversive, especially in its role as a vehicle for the authentic expression of Afro-Cuban and popular values in the context of Cuban national identity.[191] The early Cuban Modernists, or *vanguardia* artists, challenged the established ideas, methodologies and teaching practices at San Alejandro. Consequently, these young painters broke their ties with San Alejandro and joined forces with writers, poets, musicians and other intellectuals to bring about a renewal and affirmation of Cuban Creole culture.[192] Their subsequent art production represented a rupture with the prevalent Cuban pictorial traditions, by placing the restoration of Cuban cultural traditions at the centre of their artistic concerns.[193]

In differing ways, the Cuban Modernists sought to give visual expression to Cuban identity by utilising Afro-Cuban themes and other forms of popular culture.[194] Cuban artists since 1980s have also utilised Afro-Cuban themes, representing a link between the pre- and post–1959 eras, with contemporary artists drawing a pre-revolutionary Cuban intellectual and artistic tradition about Cuban nationalism, identity and the place of African-derived practices within its culture. However, the images produced by the Cuban Modernists between the 1920s and 1940s were mostly simplified, stereotypical

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[189] Guilio V. Blanc, "Cuban Modernism: The Search for a National Ethos," *Wifredo Lam and his Contemporaries, 1938–1952*, ed. Maria R Balderrama (New York: Harry N Abrams, 1992), 55, 64. These included classical European mythology, portraiture and religious and historical subjects.
[190] Camnitzer, 102–103.
[191] Blanc, 66.
[192] Juan A Martínez, " An Introduction to Modern Cuban Painting, CA. 1927-1959," Catalogue (*CubaSigloXX: modernidad y sincretismo*), (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, 1996), 365.
[193] Janet Batet, "Vanguard, Utopia and Identity," *Artecubano* 1 (1996): 88.
[194] Martínez, 366.

portrayals of popular Afro-Cuban subjects and themes. They relied upon the realistic Afro-Cuban images produced by the late nineteenth century *Costumbrista* painting tradition and the lithographs from Havana print shops as forms of historical documentation and as prototypical Afro-Cuban images to work from.[195]

The Cuban Modernist artistic visions were optimistic emblems of urban and rural life, including happy *mulatas*, *guajiros (peasants)* and tropical landscapes.[196] Thus it was the formal elements concerned with Afro-Cuban traditions that became the dominant iconographic methods of expressing their essential Cubanness, with the paraphernalia of Afro-Cuban ceremonies, carnivals, rituals and costumes the focus for virtually all of their works. They were not concerned with the meanings and mythology, and hence, they aestheticised stereotypical Afro-Cuban themes using them as an artistic source only. In the process these artists did not pay the same kind of meticulous attention to detail that the *Costumbrista* artists had. The Modernists' involvement with Afro-Cuban themes did not derive from their personal experiences as practitioners of these religions or as observers and/or researchers into the topics. Instead, their knowledge about these topics was mediated via academic and textual methods, rather than from personal experience. An apt example is Víctor Manuel García's (1897-1969) use of Afro-Cuban in his work based on Landaluze's work including carnival scenes, *ireme* figures and *mulatas*.

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[195] The term "Costumbrista" refers to the literature of manners and the typical customs of a country or region. See David H Brown, "Annotated Glossary for Fernando Ortíz's The Afro-Cuban Festival "Day of the Kings," *Cuban Festivals: An Illustrated Anthology,* ed. Judith Bettelheim (London and New York: Garland Publishing, 1993), 69, quoting Garcia-Pelayo (1983), 187.

[196] Martínez, 368. The author noted that the relationship between these two generations is more complex than has been acknowledged, and it is sometimes difficult to state what the differences between the two groups were.

Although visual depictions of African-derived themes became ubiquitous in late nineteenth/early twentieth century Cuba, race issues and tensions were real and complex in Cuba.[197] Indeed, up until the 1920s, Afro-Cubans and their cultures were perceived as unworthy of serious consideration and along with the *guajiros*, they were viewed as representations of a backward past. Despite the stereotypical appropriation of African-derived themes during the Afro-Cuban movement, the Modernists did not consider these traditions of folkloric interest only, as had been the case with the *Costumbrista* tradition. From the negative associations concerning Afro-Cuban culture and traditions at the turn of the twentieth century, the same traditions and practices now became the discursive signifiers of the desire for Cuban cultural and political independence from the U.S..

The Cuban *Mulata*

The image of the *mulata* in particular served as a literary and visual sign to express notions of Cubanness during the Afro-Cuban period. The Cuban *mulata*, a common feature of Landaluze's *Costumbrista* paintings and lithographs, became visually reconfigured at this time as a racially mixed Madonna-like peasant woman, and became the prototypical image to express a sense of Cuban identity, evident in García's Cuban *mulatas* **[Fig.2]**.[198]

The appropriation of the female (and African-derived) form to encode notions of Cuban identity, visually and ideologically, highlights the connection between the use of Afro-

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[197] Pérez, Jr., 221–222, 230. Slavery had only abolished in 1886 in Cuba and racial discrimination had been on the rise since 1893. Racism was fostered by U.S. occupation from 1898-1902, and Afro-Cuban discontent deepened during the early years of the Republic, with Afro-Cubans excluded from parks, hotels, higher education, governmental positions and public office.

[198] Maria Lluïsa Borràs, "A Brief Panorama of Cuban Culture," Catalogue (*CubaSigloXX — modernidad y sincretismo*), (Las Palmas de Gran Canaria: Centro Atlántico de Arte Moderno, 1996), 358.

Cuban themes, the arts and Cuban national identity. The use of Afro-Cuban themes during the late nineteenth/early twentieth century could be used as markers to assess Cuban gender, social and racial boundaries.[199] The discourse surrounding the use of the *mulata* and other Afro-Cuban themes in Cuba has embodied notions of Cuban identity and Cubanness, and thus can be read as manifestations of underlying social, ideological and cultural principles. Race and gender are codified according to a society's power structures at a particular time and for particular reasons.

The Afro-Cuban literary and artistic genres sought to define an ideological space that all Cubans could inhabit on equal terms, irrespective of their race and colour.[200] The re-evaluation of African-derived themes by artists and intellectuals as part of the Afro-Cuban movement led to Afro-Cuban cultural contributions beginning to be perceived as indigenous to Cuban soil because it served the political needs of the white intelligentsia at that time. In the process the *mulata* became the privileged bearer of Cuban nationalist aesthetics and Martí's concept of cultural synthesis or *mestizaje* became physically embodied by *her* during this time. Indeed, the *mulata* became the principal signifier of Cuba's national and cultural identity.

Yet, as Kutzinsky explained, the irony was that the figure of the Cuban *mulata*, as a mixed race female, probably represented the most socially, politically and economically marginalised sector of Cuban society. In Kutzinsky's view what was most contradictory about the utilisation of the image of the *mulata* and its discursive involvement with Cuban nationalism was

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[199] Vera Kutzinsky, *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism*, (Charlottesville, VA and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993).
[200] Ibid., 154–155.

"the symbolic privileging of a socially underprivileged group defined by its phenotype, its gender and its imputed licentious sexuality".[201]

As a female of African lineage, the *mulata* was considered doubly inferior in societal terms. This highlights existing negative racial and gender associations and how European positivistic approaches to issues of race and ethnicity permeated Cuban ideological consciousness. Paradoxically, the concept of *mestizaje* — embodied by the use of Afro-Cuban themes, especially the *mulata* — sought to celebrate racial diversity while at the same time actually avoiding divisive social realities.[202] These themes thus became inextricably linked with Cuban nationalism as part of a depoliticised ethnographic discourse utilised by certain intellectuals to signify a multi-cultural and multi-racial Cuba. Whereas, in reality, very little structural pluralism occurred in the social system and real social and racial problems and inequalities were displaced and hidden.[203] This was part of the process of Cuban nation building, with Afro-Cuban traditions beginning to be perceived as a vehicle for national survival against the backdrop of the threat posed by North Americanisation.

In contrast to the extensive use of the *mulata* to ideologically and visually signify Cuban identity, there were very few professional female artists (and none of colour) working during the pre-revolutionary era. In fact, the only female painter included in the Cuban Modernist movement was Amelia Peláez del Casal (1896–1968), who, alongside Wifredo Lam, is probably the best-known representative of Cuban painting in the twentieth century. As with others involved in the Afro-Cuban movement, Peláez came from a white, upper middle class Cuban family and was highly educated.[204] The small

[201] Ibid., 7.
[202] Ibid., 154.
[203] Ibid., 12–13, 145.
[204] Blanc, 60.

number of other women involved in the Cuban visual arts spectrum were also white, well-educated ones from wealthy backgrounds.

This includes the eminent anthropologist Lydia Cabrera (1900–1984), who actively supported contemporary artists such as Lam at a time when the Cuban public had little interest in *cosas negras* (*black issues*). There was also the women's organisation, Lyceum in Havana in 1929,[205] which became an important venue as it provided a space to promote culture through exhibitions, concerts and poetry readings. It also housed key art events with many one-person exhibitions for the *Vanguardia* painters.[206]

Despite the artistic and cultural renovations that took place in Cuban society during the Afro-Cuban period, the reality was that the structure of the visual arts sphere pre–1959 remained an extremely patriarchal (and white) one, with a lack of female artists, Afro-Cubans and the popular classes in general. These sections of society were not included in the national collective Cuban voice, despite the focus on African-derived (and female) elements in nationalist discourses, suggesting the racial and gender hierarchies that existed. It also illustrates the precarious ground on which the concept of Cuban identity was constructed and how deeply contradictory a national discourse and ideology *mestizaje* really was in Cuba.[207]

Indeed, the only Afro-Cuban female inclusion in the visual arts and the discussion on Cuban identity took the form of the *mulata*. But the *mulata's* high cultural and discursive

[205] Borràs, 359.
[206] Martínez, 12.
[207] Kutzinsky., 5–6. Notable Afro-Cuban male exceptions were poet and editor Nicolás Guillén and sculptor Teodoro Ramos Blanco, who studied and taught at San Alejandro and became the best-known Cuban sculptor in the U.S. and Europe in the 1930s–1940s. He also developed strong ties to the Harlem Renaissance.

visibility contrasted sharply with the reality of her social invisibility. Thus the use of Afro-Cuban images and themes can be meaningfully read in terms of how race, gender and sexuality have historically played a part in the formation of nation identity and power relations in Cuba.[208] This provides a useful comparative platform to situate female art production and the use of Afro-Cuban themes and the female form in the contemporary period in the following two chapters.

[208] Ibid.

Chapter Four

Female Traces: Popular Themes, Myths and Cultural Spaces

The Contemporary Female Trace

The first three chapters set out the pre- and post–1959 historical, socio-cultural, artistic, critical and ideological framework, demonstrating the wide range of factors that can bear upon the artists in this study's art production and formulations of self-perception. The following three chapters will concentrate in-depth on the artists' work and examine which artistic codes and practices and socio-cultural resources they have drawn upon to reflect and represent their notions of national, socio-cultural and personal identity.

As discussed in the previous chapter, the discursive use of African-derived themes in the pre–1959 period, specifically the *mulata*, represented ingrained societal opinions that serve to highlight the racist and patriarchal bent of Cuban society. The continued use of Afro-Cuban themes and the female body in the contemporary era provides sources of continuity in Cuban art production. Such themes can also be read as useful indicators of larger currents of thought about post–1959 Cuban society in relation to the gendered, social and racial parameters of the country. Furthermore, the reasons why and the status of who has appropriated these specific variables in different eras in relation to ideas about Cuban self-perception is also revealing about the impact of the Revolution's ideological, social and educational reforms. Indeed, these themes have been used as effective ideological and visual tools that have aided artists to bridge a social gap in the post-revolutionary period.

The interest of this thesis lies in the artists' use of these themes, as well as others they utilise, to condition meaning in their art production and as indicators of contemporary cultural and social principles. The inclusion of the female form has been a consistent characteristic of the women's work in this study, and all of them have developed a high degree of self-conscious reflexivity, undertaking subjective explorations through their art productions. Important relationships are evident between the female body (often their own physical self) and the objects and subject matters they have chosen to depict and present.

From time immemorial, the body has served as the carrier and the metaphor of our traditions, passing on its culture, history and life.[209] Our bodies are at the centre of our world, and in this context, self-exposure by female artists becomes not a form of exhibitionism but a self-conscious act of representing their specific thoughts, experiences and identities. One could talk of the body as the pivot on which each individual's fateful adventure in humanity ultimately turns. Moreover, reading bodies is a way of reading how history has been ordered and bodies record and make visible the effects of power relations.[210] The utilisation of the body can therefore be read as a site for cultural discourse that is meaningful in terms of examining these artists' identities as Cuban and as women.

In my examination of the five artists in this study I will draw on Hilary Robinson's research, which demonstrated how critical terms from psychoanalysis have enabled a rethinking of the representation of the female body and identity issues. According to

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[209] David Michael Levin, *The Body's Recollection of Being: Phenomenological Psychology and the Deconstruction of Nihilism,* (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 5.

[210] Joanna Isaak, Feminism & Contemporary Art: The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 51.

Robinson's argument, women artists transgress what it is to be an artist and what it is to be a woman. Working with and on their own bodies has emphasised the transformative artistic process and provided them with a conflation of the role of artist/model/work. For female artists, the gendered visuals of their gendered bodies and of their gendered work are by their very existence transgressive and marginalised; they cross borders. As Robinson explains, "She" artist is bodily and professionally of the margins.[211] Their works can be said to be "embodiments of their embodiment of gender: a gendered self-representation, no matter what the medium or overt context".[212]

Moreover, traces of these women's gendered bodies and selves are always left in their works. Robinson suggested that the limits of intelligibility in artwork could be explored by reference to four different bodies, which will be addressed in the following chapters. These are the body of the artist through the presence or trace of one's gesture and the body of the viewer and their experience of encountering the artwork. Also, the body of the artwork itself in its materiality and the representation of the body within the work as its overt subject matter, or declared content.[213]

The representation of the female body as a place will also be explored because the way in which these women have used their bodies and the representation of the female form in their art endeavours raise philosophical questions about notions of place and emplacement for them. Place can be indicated in many different ways, formally and technically, as well as through the depiction of many varied elements. Yet women are

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[211] Hilary Robinson draws upon Luce Irigaray's phrase "She" in her essay "Border Crossings: womanliness, body, representation," *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies,* ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press), 138–146.
[212] Ibid., 140.
[213] Ibid., 138–139.

always doubly implaced, as the female body itself is place-productive.[214] The woman's body is in a place and is also a place: a vessel or receptacle able to contain new life. Thus there is a pre-given duality of the female body's own place that must also be accounted for in this discussion.

Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortíz coined the term *Cubanía* in relation to the Afro-Cuban movement, as a term that reflected a changing spiritual state and sensibility and one that has historically signified an active desire to be Cuban. I consider that this term also has relevance for art practices and developments since the early 1980s. Visual forms of discourse presented on *Cubanía* through Afro-Cuban and other popular motifs and beliefs since the 1980s have reflected a changed Cuban sensibility. Within this changed sensibility, the utilisation of many varied social, cultural and religious elements have been central to artists' personal artistic processes within their particular evolving socialist context.

Myth and Ritual

For the women in this study myth and ritual, along with religion and popular culture have been stimuli in their artistic endeavours, and these themes have been intricately associated with their bodies. There is also a sense of unity that underlies mythologies, religions, rituals and the whole of human culture.[215] All the great institutions of mankind, both secular and religious, are said to spring from rituals, as are the origin of the gods and all cultural forms. Religion is a tradition of rituals that bind and fasten the body to the performance through special tasks, postures, gestures and movements and through

[214] Edward Casey, "By Way of Body," *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 236.
[215] Rene Girard, *Violence and the Sacred*, (Baltimore and London: John Hopkins University Press, 1977), 89, 299, 306.

the ritual practices of the religion's traditions.[216] Mythology is a rhetorical way to explain reality that helps to bind a community together, which led German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche to comment,

> "Every culture that has lost myth has lost, by the same token, its natural healthy creativity as only a horizon ringed about by myths can unify a culture".[217]

In contemporary Cuba, cultural and religious aspects are very connected at the level of ordinary Cuban citizens and it is sometimes difficult to separate ritual and religious traditions even when one is actually involved in the practice. The assortment of symbolism and iconography present in Cuban culture has enabled Cubans "to assimilate symbolic values without prejudice and to take on board a sacred union of cosmogonical paradigms".[218] Evidently a range of religious practices function as coexisting fragments without contradiction in Cuban society and are not considered mutually exclusive by their practitioners and believers. The result has been the merging of composite European and African-derived concepts in Cuba. For instance, one should bear in mind that a *santero* may also consider himself as Catholic, whilst at the same time also being a *palero*, *Arará* or *Abakuá* member. Another example is that when one arrives at the house of a *santero,* he will ask that you make an offering to his *nganga,* which is a *Palo Monte* concept (see Glossary).

This multi-cultural presence has strengthened the restorative function that mysticism has in everyday Cuban life, with the term *convivencia* (*co-existing*) often used to describe

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[216] Levin, 180–181.
[217] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy from the Spirit of Music* (New York: Doubleday, 1956), sec. 23, p. 136, quoted in Levin, 321.
[218] Osvaldo Sánchez, "Jose Bedia — Restoring our Otherness". *Third Text* 13 (winter 1991) : 64. Translated by Diego Robirosa.

this process. Elements drawn from a selection of religious, popular and ritual beliefs and practices are more accepted in everyday Cuban life situations than they are in western societies, and the importance placed on such traditions appears more integrated with Cuban ways of being. Leading on from this, a *mestizaje* of ideas and beliefs has often been visually and metaphorically entwined in contemporary Cuban artistic practices, with many artists concerned with the co-presence of the profane and the spirit worlds, including Marta María Pérez, Belkis Ayón, Magdalena Campos-Pons and Tania Bruguera. They have drawn upon Cuba's living cultural heritage by taking their subject matter from various Afro-Cuban and indigenous religious traditions, rituals and myths. They have selected images and concepts and reorganised them into their own visual iconographies, which have then become the product of the various cultural streams that converge in Cuba.

Marta María Pérez

The spiritual and cosmogonical dimensions of Afro-Cuban practices and beliefs have been fundamental to all of Marta María Pérez's artistic endeavours. Her work has crossed boundaries between the sacred and the profane, and in the process a complexity of meaning has been articulated in her photographs. Although not a practitioner of any religious traditions, she considers Afro-Cuban religious traditions worthy of her deep respect. She grew up in a working class neighbourhood of Havana, where strong religious and popular cultural traditions persisted, consequently the art she has created has been shaped from 'within' by the values, visions and sensibilities found in that horizon. Pérez's photography has thus been based upon the religious and

popular traditions and practices that have formed an essential part of her sense of being, *Weltanschauung* and horizon.

Like other white Cubans, she should be considered as a cultural *mulato*, in the sense that Cuban people believe that their Cuban heritage is a shared mixture of many varied elements and everyone has access to this same pool of traditions and practices.

> "My work is a personal approach to religion. It is not ethnographical. One does not need to be a good practitioner and follow it strictly in order to benefit from it. It is part of the [Cuban] common life and everyone knows how it should be used".[219]

The artist's knowledge about Afro-Cuban topics has been mediated by the work of her contemporary, Natalia Bolívar, whom she met in 1994, and from her personal experiences and interaction with religious practitioners. However, it is Cuban anthropologist Lydia Cabrera's monumental work, *El Monte*, that Pérez deems "*infinitivo*" *(infinitive)*, and which she can reread over and again and always find something new.[220] *El Monte* is arguably Cabrera's best-known work and is still considered the most complete book written on Afro-Cuban religions, customs and beliefs. The title of this important work refers to "the woods/forest", a concept that embodies many different ideas and religious beliefs and traditions in the Cuban context. Its scope covers a diverse range of belief systems and religious practices and traditions found in Cuba, and this is indicated by the full title of this monumental work.[221] Therefore, Pérez considers Cabrera as a "spiritual guide" and her works like "bibles," [222] as they include almost

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[219] Marta María Pérez, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, December 1994.
[220] Marta María Pérez, interview by author, tape recording, Monterrey Mexico, 1 March 2000.
[221] The title in Spanish is *El Monte — Igbo, Finda, Ewe Orisha, Vititi Nfinda (notas sobre las religiónes, la magia, las supersticiones y el folkiore de los negros criollos y el pueblo de Cuba)*, (Miami: Ediciones Universal, Colección del Chicherekú, 2000). Title translates as "notes on the religions, magic, superstitions and folklore of Creole Negroes and the Cuban people".
[222] Grady T. Turner, "Marta María Pérez Bravo," (Los Angeles: *n.p.*, 2001, accessed 7 September 2002) ; available from http://artscenecal.com/ArtistsFiles/PerezBravoMM/PerezBravoMMFile/Gturner0401Essay.html ; Internet

boundless projections of Afro-Cuban culture and posit a cosmos of gods, spirits, humans, objects, animals and supernatural beings.

Pérez has been surrounded by such Afro-Cuban traditions and has felt the need to respect and record them through her creative enterprise. Her work has been her personal spiritual interpretation set within religious, ethnic and gender-orientated parameters. Moreover, as her art production has been based in ritual and myth, with the African and Afro-Cuban presence underlying her process of conception, so the act of creation has become a spiritual practice for her. She has stated that she is not overtly concerned with philosophical ideas and concepts. Yet one could argue that the cosmogonical and philosophical dimension to her intellectual probing of these religious beliefs and traditions belies her comments that she has no particular interest in philosophical concerns. Or, at least redefine her interest as one based in non-western philosophies and cosmologies, as her art production is concerned with sacred, spiritual, existential and vernacular discourses.[223] Moreover, she has sought to make her own interpretation about the religions and ritual that are relevant to her life.[224] As Gerardo Mosquera has explained,

> "It may be the very character of art that is modified in Pérez's work, bringing it close to a mystical/existential practice within a personal liturgical process".[225]

The artist does not follow any religion but she believes and has faith.[226] She has a great interest in religions in general though and in the similarities and universal themes they

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[223] Gerardo Mosquera, "The 14 Sons of William Tell," Catalogue (*No Man is an Island: Young Cuban Art*), (Finland: Pori Art Museum, 1990), 48.
[224] Pérez interview, 1 March 2000.
[225] Gerardo Mosquera, "Elegguá at the (Post) Modern Crossroads," draft copy, by kind permission of the author, 1995.
[226] Pérez interview, 1 March 2000.

share, including Buddhism and Hinduism, as well as African-derived religions. The only religion that has not interested her very much is Catholicism, which is interesting because the history of Cuba has been intricately bound to Catholicism as it has with African traditions. Pérez dislikes the historically close bond that exists between Catholicism and colonial politics and, despite her familial association with Catholicism, she also dislikes the Catholic religion with its emphasis on guilt and repenting for earthly sins. In contrast, Pérez has assumed the right to forgive or excuse our earthly sins. She also laments the lack of more meaning to life before death that Catholicism suffers from and its alienation from the everyday life that we feel and touch.[227]

In contrast, she respects Afro-Cuban religions and considers they have many possibilities for an interpretation of the spiritual.[228] The religions of African origin also possess an abundant *convivencia* with the spiritual world and entities, a very important concept in contemporary Cuban life and unlike the Catholic ethos.[229] Afro-Cuban religions are part of quotidian Cuban life experiences and Pérez believes that *convivencia* produces a brilliant and interesting way of understanding the world, where spiritual beings are involved in our daily lives, in the joy and the sadness we experience here and now in this material world.[230] Therefore, the messages within Pérez's images relate to the unity of life expressed in Afro-Cuban traditions, where everything appears to be interconnected; gods, humans, energy, ancestors, nature — all relying upon and reacting to everything else. She has contemplated in philosophical terms how the moral

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[227] Email communication with Pérez dated 3 May 2001. "No me gusta la religión católica, me hace sentir siempre culpable, no se de que..., no creo en que otra persona, como yo, se atribuya el derecho a "perdonar" nuestros "pecados," se me hace extremadamente aburrida, en estar valorando casi mas la "vida" después de la muerte, a la vida que nos toca en estos momentos. Además de que siempre la religión católica ha estado estrechamente vinculada a la política".

[228] Pérez interview, 1 March 2000.

[229] Email communication with Pérez. "La religiónes de origen africano tienen una hermosa convivencia con el mundo espiritual, el ahora, hoy, es muy importante".

[230] Juan A. Martínez, *Cuban Art & National Identity: The vanguardia painters 1927–1950*, (Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida, 1994), 194.

meanings and ethics found in Afro-Cuban religious practices are closely connected to the decisions one makes in life. Believers and devotees consult with *santeros* in order to make decisions on all aspects of their lives: such as love, health and fertility. The *santeros* are there to help people obtain what they desire yet people must assume the consequences of those desires as part of their destiny.[231]

Pérez has undertaken an ongoing exploration of the tripartite paradigm woman/body/culture. She has displayed the world of Cuban popular culture and religious and spiritual ideas on her own body, using it to comprehend the world as she interprets it and to represent human feelings and emotions: fragility, the precariousness of existence, fear and faith.[232] Pérez's bodily trace has been a constant and underlying factor in her conceptually orientated photographic endeavours, with her naked body often located at the centre of her photographic production. Her approach to the portrayal and use of the human body has allowed a perspective that reflects non-western ideals, whilst working with western derived materials. Indeed, her bodily traces are one of the structural manifestations that can help to identify a space, or difference, between African-American and Euro-American visual art expressions. This African-Americanness should be viewed as more of a cultural issue than a racial one for Pérez.

Western representations of women have, to a great extent, been governed historically by the nude. The gendered gaze has implied a sexualised female body whose primary

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[231] Email communication with Pérez. "En estas religiónes, los valores morales y éticos son muy relativos, las desiciónes que tomamos en la vida estan amparados por las diferentes deidades, los creyentes consultan con los santos, para tomar desiciónes, y eso es lo mas importante. Hay santos para todo, para cuestiones amorosas, de salud, de fertilidad, etc. Hay religiónes en que el daño à otra persona se contempla como posibilidad, provocar enfermedad, peñas e incluso la muerte, si es necesario para lograr algo que se quiere. O sea, que los Santos ayudan a conseguir lo que deseamos, asumiendo las consecuencias como parte del destino y el deseo de los mismos".

[232] Rosa Martinez, "Marta María Pérez interview with Rosa Martinez," *Cuba — Maps of Desire*, ed. Gerald Matt, trans. Bernhard Höfele (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 187.

importance has been for male consumption. Whereas, Pérez has consciously used the tensions of the female form in her photography to open up a different, gendered space and place that has not been defined by her nakedness. Her photographs have indicated a disinterest in the concepts of western feminine beauty and perfection. Her unclothed body has been a common feature of her art production, but her body has not been presented with sexual or erotic motives: even though she has often been depicted naked, she has never been a nude. In her creations she has not exploited her sexuality for the benefit of the spectator, and a ritual or symbolic body and a cultural or collective gaze have replaced the sexualised body and the male gaze.[233] From the viewer's slant, one has been cast into the role of a ritual observer, reiterating the collective gaze.[234]

Pérez views the use of her own body as the most direct way of expressing her own feelings and she draws inspiration from Cuban and Afro-Cuban traditions. Her body serves a specific purpose in her artistic projects, as a representation of her interpretation of the meanings associated with Afro-Cuban religious concepts. Nakedness functions in support of ritual in the depictions of her personalised thoughts and experiences, implying that to be naked is to be without disguise. Nakedness connotes honesty as a positive visual value and it helps to take away the element of the mysteriousness of the sexualised female body.

This artist has thus redefined her naked body as an activator of meaning by spatially isolating her body parts in order to explore them in relation to wider universal ideas and Afro-Cuban religious themes. Her works thus extend beyond being mere portraits or

[233] Michael D Harris, "Ritual Bodies — Sexual Bodies. The role and presentation of the body in African-American art," *Third Text* 12 (1990): 83.
[234] Ibid., 94.

self-portraits and they move beyond a representation of the subject photographed, to instead refer to an abstracted referent.[235] Through her images the artist has questioned who has control of the body or self, as a way of considering her own destiny and identity. For her the use of her body and its traces have been a more exact and correct way to participate, and in that sense, one could say there has been an autobiographical element to her work.

Her particular use and presentation of her own body has indicated an Afro-Cuban/Afro-Latin American/Afro-American response, as African-derived visual expression, in line with African modes of practice, has most often utilised the naked body in a metaphorical sense to suggest a state symbolic of transformation. Also, in many traditional African forms of artistic expression, the female form has been used to reflect concerns with women as origin-givers or to ideas related to fecundity. These creative forms have often functioned in combination with spiritual beliefs and practices, where the body has been understood as representing religious or symbolic principles.[236]

Certain works of hers have produced extremely powerful iconographic female images that in a western art historical sense could be construed as Feminist statements. Pérez though emphatically denies that Feminism is a self-conscious concern to her or that her photographs are Feminist conceptions. She was, however, the first artist to include the Afro-American presence on her own body and in relation to her particular feminine experience.[237] Her personal maternity in the mid–1980s was a key experience in the

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[235] Juan Antonio Molina, "All originates from Foreign Lands," Catalogue (*MARTA MARIA PEREZ BRAVO*), (New York: *n.p.*, 1999), 408.
[236] Harris, 83.
[237] Gerardo Mosquera, "Elegguá at the (Post) Modern Crossroads," *Santeria Aesthetics in Contemporary Latin American Art*, ed. Arturo Lindsay (Washington and London: Institute of International Visual Arts, 1996), 252.

direction that her artistic enterprise took, as motherhood brought profound changes to her life and consequently to her art production. Her depictions of pregnancy could place her within the realm of certain western Feminist theories, as, arguably, the pregnant woman is considered to be the ultimate female image.

Her *Para concebir* series (*In order to conceive*) (1985–1986) **[Fig.3]** documented her pregnancy and this series engaged in a process of reinventing motherhood. She was concerned with maternity and its mix with religion, faith and superstition, as these are very important elements in Cuban culture.[238] She drew upon her most intimate and personal experiences to consider the female body in relation to her maternity. Her pregnancy with twins was a very difficult period in her life. She sought through her art to highlight the pain, the reality and the contradictions of it, rather than the romanticised notions often attached to it. Her pregnant body made a clear reference to her biological specificity, displaying the consequences of her femaleness. She did not shy away from graphically displaying her heavily pregnant form and the violence inflicted upon the female body during gestation.

In the process she ritualised procreation and offered a vision of the sacredness of the female body's regeneratory capacity as a life giver. By so doing, Pérez drew upon her double emplacement as a woman and mother, which was mediated by her interest in religion, and she highlighted her body as "a symbol and place of physical and metaphysical convergence".[239] Similarly, in *Cultos paralelos* (*Altar de Ibeyis*) (*Parallel cults — Ibeji altars*) (1988) **[Fig.4]**, the focus on her breasts could also be connected to

[238] Pérez interview, 1 March 2000.
[239] Jose Miguel G Cortés, "Memory and Oblivion," Catalogue (*MARTA MARÍA PÉREZ BRAVO*), (Spain: *n.p.*, 1997), 94.

her double emplacement, with her breasts portrayed as maternal objects of life-giving sustenance and as part of a ritual space.

Aside from the trace of her own body, the inclusion of two small plastic dolls — *muñequitas* — to represent Pérez's twins daughters born in 1986, are a recurring feature in her artistic enterprise, to indicate her sense of motherhood and her double emplacement as a female and a mother. As the mother of twin daughters, issues that relate to motherhood and twin images have had a specific significance in this artist's photographic corpus, but the depiction of her children has extended beyond merely visually representing her personal experience to encapsulate African-derived beliefs as well.

Iconology concerning twins is a deeply rooted concept in Cuban culture and stems from various African beliefs that twins have special connotations. As the mother of twins, this also places Pérez in a special position. According to Central African and West African *Yoruba* cultural beliefs, the birth of twins is an occasion for love and joy. There is also, however, an ancient certainty that twin children are possessed of strange powers for good and evil and are not human.[240] In addition to the African cosmologies, there are also Catholic religious associations with twins. In Catholic theology, Cosma and Damien were early Christian martyrs full of charity, among whose attributes included two little dolls sitting on stools.

In the Cuban context these Catholic martyrs have become intimately associated with the

[240] There is an unusually high rate of twin births among the *Yoruba* and a prodigious sculptural tradition extant for twin images, known as *Ibejis*, which are carved when one or both twins die. These statues are supposed to protect against sorcery.

Ibeji twins of *Yoruba* derivation, minor *orishas* (see Glossary) known as Taebo and Kainde. There are similarities between these sets of religious twins. Both are associated with children, childish traits and the notion of protection. In formal terms the twins portrayed throughout Pérez's images have physically resembled Cosma and Damien, as she has used Caucasian dolls. *Cultos paralelos* was the work in which the artist made reference to the presence of the saint twins, and she made an analogy between the saints' religious cult and her own biography, using the African term for twins — *Ibeyis*.[241]

This work contained elements of private and religious ritual and symbology by specific histrionic means, in which the artist empowered herself through the convergence of her personal life experiences with the subject of religion, mediated through the use of her own bodily parts. She used formal and semantic methods to draw a parallel between the cult to the Christian and the Afro-Cuban twin deities — *Los Ibeyes* — and the cult to her twin daughters, her own *Ibeyes*.

In addition to the syncretic imagery associated with twins, the altar depicted in *Cultos paralelos* (Figure.4a) also related to both African and Christian practices. In this piece her body was converted into an altar, as a cultural, sexual and ritually specific site. Altars have been central to Christian and to African-derived religious practices on both sides of the Atlantic and they are integral aspects of their socio-ritual processes. Catholic forms of sacred altar presentation have been maintained in Cuba. *Santeros* also have a complex system of altar making for the *orishas,* with altars serving as shrines for the

[241] Pérez interview, December 1994.

pantheon of deities. In the African and African-American context, placing objects in shrines means that they acquire religious significance and power. Pérez portrayed Cuba's altar making traditions in another work as well, *Quiero por techo el cielo* (*I want the sky as my roof*) (1995) **[Fig.5]**. In this composition, the artist's body became a covered altar with only the soles of her feet and her lower legs visible, visually recreating the act of draping cloth over altars.

The act of offering is intricately associated with altars made for *orishas* and saints and this idea is indicated in Figure.4 with Pérez's breasts, as the central focus, strategically placed in small offertory vessels. Furthermore, her body positioning in this image is suggestive of prayer or supplication. There are ongoing cycles of gift exchange relationships that are central to the *orisha* devotees' personal, religious and social lives. The act of offering by the devotee puts the *orisha* in a position of indebtedness and is an expression of reciprocation between the human and spirit worlds. Pérez also utilised her body's traces to portray Cuban offertory religious traditions in *Recibe ofrendas* (*He/she receives offerings*) (1992) **[Fig.6]**, in which her bodily actions of offering and prostration appear to indicate placation to the deities. As she stated,

> "[*Recibe ofrendas*] is the relationship between the twins — it's not a sacrifice, just an offering for the twin divinities as they are represented and identified with children".[242]

Yoruba art has abounded with images of people proffering vessels. Among various *Yoruba* cultural groups the act of prostration is the traditional means of showing recognition to seniors and to people of superior status and relates to the idea of becoming physically and socially lowered. *Recibe ofrendas* demonstrates that *Santería*

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[242] Ibid.

practice has retained the concept of prostration as a means of indicating ritual status and rank. Moreover, the artist's facial expression in this work falls in line with *Yoruba* canons of composure, as the correct body position is supposedly given more focus by the firmness of facial expression accompanying the offertory action.

Although the title and her body language in this work indicate she is making an offering, there are no emblems or artifacts to suggest which particular deities the offering is meant for. It is likely that Pérez's aim is to present the generic act of offering through this image, to pay homage to her motherhood and to all the Cuban religious deities — gods/saints/*orishas* — in general to reflect the *mestizaje* of Cuban culture and of herself. This notion of *mestizaje* is highlighted in another work of hers, *Protección* (*Protection*) (1988) **[Fig.7]**, which shows the artist's naked torso covered with thorns. In cultural and religious terms, the essential meaning of the iconography of the thorns on Pérez's body is their literal and philosophical connection to the all-important *Ceiba* (*Silk-Cotton tree*) and its fundamental importance for all of Cuba's religious traditions. Pérez commented about this piece that

> "It [the *Ceiba*] represents sacred actions, as it is the root of all the religions".[243]

The *Ceiba* tree is an Afro-Cuban adaptation of the African concept, Iroko, but the *Ceiba* has transcended African religious boundaries and become a universal Cuban concept. The *Ceiba* represents a living altar for the four Afro-Cuban religious-liturgical complexes: *Santería, Palo Monte, Arará* and *Abakuá*, as well as for Catholicism. *Kongo* descendants call it the tree house of god, various *Santería orisha*s are worshipped in it

[243] Ibid.

and it is considered the sacred tree of the *Yoruba* deity, Iroko. There are also Catholic folk myths concerning the *Ceiba*. Supposedly this tree opened up for Mary to shelter in as she was fleeing. She hid in its hollow and the trunk then covered itself with spines to protect her and the holy child. According to Catholic folk traditions, since then all *Ceibas* open themselves up annually and the Virgin appears. Its wood is considered holy as it was in contact with the holy bodies of Mary and Jesus. Other spirits are also believed to reside in the *Ceiba*, so it is a meeting point of spirits, of the mountain, the dead, ancestors, saints and *orisha*s.

"[The *Ceiba*] can represent a god or anything else: it is a universal idea in all religions".[244]

In Figure.7, the artist draws on the symbolism associated with the *Ceiba* and utilises her body metaphorically and literally as a protective device, so the act of using her body becomes an act of self-protection.[245] Her body is the ritual object, like an altar, with her torso visually and symbolically representing the trunk of the *Ceiba*. Her use of the trace of her body to represent the *Ceiba* may be in an analogous way to compare herself as a mother and the *Ceiba* as a creator and protector in a universal sense. The idea of protection is explicitly stated in the title and in the context of the unity of religious ideas connected with the *Ceiba*, it is apparent that Cubans believe everyone needs the favour of mother *Ceiba* to live.

Whilst the *Ceiba* is believed to protect through various ritual practices, its great power also has the potential to be used to perform bad deeds as well as good ones, so just as protection can be sought from it, it can also be asked to help harm someone. The thorns

[244] Ibid. See Lydia Cabrera, *El Monte* (Miami: Colección del Chicherekú en el Exilo, 1983 [1954]), 149–163.
[245] Ibid.

emanating from the artist's body can be read as spiritual and physical safeguards, offering the protection of saints, *orisha*s and ancestors, mediated through the artist's bodily trace. Equally, the numerous thorns that emanate from her torso could also be a reference to the idea of human nipples as thorns, thus converting the female sexual organs into injuring and aggressive weapons to protect the artist from any unwanted attack, physical and/or spiritual.

The examples given above indicate how Pérez has developed an important relationship between her body and the sacred objects and ideas she has chosen to depict.[246] By incorporating her own body into objects, places and/or concepts, she has empowered herself in sites of ritual communication and ritualised her body. Another apt example is *Otán* **[Fig.8]** where the viewer is presented with the artist's hand curled into a fist, replicating the stones visible in the *sopera* (see Glossary). Her hand and the stones represent the sacred herbs that serve the *orisha*s. Through the trace of her hand, the artist became the material representation of an *orisha.*

Furthermore, *Cultos paralelos* and *Protección* indicated the double play at work in some of Pérez's photographs, as she sometimes draws on both African and Afro-Cuban concepts and practices to recreate a very specific and personal symbolism. This demonstrates her interest in re-emphasising Cuba's own traditions whilst striving for a sense of universality at the same time. This is also evident through her use of multifarious religious strands and the combination of different symbolic elements into her

[246] Molina, 409.

conceptual art creations. The logic of these works, as Murphy has discussed, "lies in their being both contemporary and not at the same time".[247]

This process includes combining different concepts from the same religious and cultural traditions. *Macuto* **[Fig.9]** is just such an image, in which Pérez combines two different *Kongo* derived concepts in one image: a charm and a cosmogram. The artist stated in reference to this work that *Macuto* is an African word that refers to a *Palo Monte* receptacle of power that contains spiritual experiences.[248] Along with other elements, charms are used by *paleros* as protective devices for the practical needs of everyday life. Figure.9 also includes a very powerful *Palo Monte* ritual drawing, a cosmogram, inscribed onto the artist's chest, sacralising the space. The particular signature she depicts represents the four moments of the sun — sign of signs and foundation of everything in *Kongo* thought.[249] In *Kongo* and *Palo Monte* practice, a person taking an oath must stand on the centre of a cross, precariously situating themselves between life and death invoking the judgement of God and the dead upon oneself. Pérez's chest is literally placed at the centre of the cross, so she metaphorically situates herself between life and death. She positions her clasped hands, containing the charm, over the spot where the centre of the cross is located, creating a very powerful image.

As well as a fundamental motif in *Kongo* thought representing a point of intersection between ancestors and the living, the importance of the cross motif extends beyond associations with *Kongo*-derived religious ideas in the Cuban context. It has become

[247] Jay Murphy, "The Young and the Restless in Habana," *Third Text* 20 (1992): 125.
[248] Pérez interview, December 1994.
[249] Joseph Cornet and Robert Farris Thompson, *Four Moments of the Sun*, (Washington DC: National Gallery of Art, 1982), 43–52. The fusion of a cross in a circle embodies the *Kongo* concept of the intersection of the worlds, which serves to activate the centre of power, marking the very eye of the cosmos. In Cuba arrows replaced the sun disks and stand for the four winds of the universe.

inextricably linked with the Christian cross and the *Santería* deity Echu-Elegguá, the guardian of the crossroads. Therefore, Pérez's use of the cross motif may allude to all of these religious ideas simultaneously in one image. In addition to the polysemic significance of the imagery, the artist adds extra ritual power to this image by encapsulating the ingredients that would normally be placed inside a charm into her own hands, locating her 'charm' at the centre of the cross, with two *muñequitas* inside it.

It has been noted that for Pérez to identify her own solar plexus with the very centre of the cosmos in relation to her own maternity is one of the most powerful images that African-derived imagery has offered within the confines of western art. As such it has been said that this image could constitute

"One of the most radical and daring Feminist statements made in contemporary African-American imagery".[250]

As well as iconographical references to the *mestizaje* of Cuban culture, Pérez also makes direct reference to specific *orisha*s. She extracts the most basic signs and ideas surrounding the deities in terms of their functions and attributes and abstracts and manipulates these elements in her photographs.[251] For instance, in *Caminos* (*Pathways*) (1990) **[Fig.10]**, Pérez incorporates her own body in a work based on the *Santería* deity, Echu-Elegguá. As the guardian of the crossroads and the phallic god of fecundity, Echu-Elegguá is a major *orisha* who holds the keys to destiny and life's many pathways. The complexities surrounding the nature of this character are symbolised by the use of two names, a trait that also exists in continental west Africa, Eshu-Elegba. In the Cuban context, he personifies the totally unpredictable character of chance that

[250] Mosquera, "Elegguá ," 254.
[251] Juan Antonio Molina, "Walking with the Head," Catalogue (*MARTA MARÍA PÉREZ BRAVO*), (Spain: *n.p.*, 1997), 101.

opens and closes the paths arbitrarily. He is the very embodiment of the crossroads and thus the connection with the title becomes apparent. As Pérez stated in relation to Figure.10,

> "It is a recreation of the individual's path/project. Elegguá opens and closes the paths".[252]

Pérez's emphasis on Elegguá's role in personal destiny is also stressed in other works such as *Tiene la llave del destino* (*He has the key to destiny*) (1992) **[Fig.11]** and *Esta en tus manos* (*It is in your hands*) (1995) **[Fig.12]**. As the titles of Figures.10/11/12 imply, it is Elegguá who holds the key to one's destiny. Pérez's bodily traces in these works also indicate a level of human submission in reflection upon one's own fate and the role the *orisha*s play in one's life.

In Figure.10, Pérez uses her body as an altar and employs specific iconographical elements associated with Echu, in addition to the textual reference, to make connections to this *orisha*. These include the mounds of mud and cowrie shells,[253] and the knifelike protrusion emanating from Echu's head signify that he is not to carry burdens. He is the messenger of the gods, carrying sacrifices at points of intersection and the ultimate master of potentiality. The feather also has symbolic associations, as a feather is Echu's seal of supernatural force (*aché*) to make all things happen and multiply. Furthermore, Figure.10 may be a polysemic image that also refers to other African-derived ideas. The

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[252] Pérez interview, 1994

[253] Joan Westcott, "The Sculpture and Myths of Eshu-Elegba in Africa," *Africa Journal of the International African Institute* XXXII (1962): 338. In some *Yoruba* towns at the central Eshu shrines and market places, laterite pillars or mounds of mud or clay were erected as a symbol of the deity. Domestically these sacred mounds were placed in compounds or in doorways, linking back to Eshu's myth of origin. Placed in such liminal places, the mounds were supposed to serve as protection from the detrimental effects of Eshu and lead onto growth and change.

artist's legs have been encompassed within an Elegguá effigy, which may refer to Central African receptacles of power, such as a *Nkisi Nkonde*, in which the act of incorporating oneself within such an object activates or empowers it.

The hook shaped objects wrapped around the artist's ankles in Figure.10a are known as *garabatos* in Cuba. They are agricultural implements that were used to aid grass cutting and became associated with Elegguá during the slave era in Cuba. The connection between Elegguá and these agricultural implements may have arisen because their shape is reminiscent of the hooked clubs (*Ogo Esu*) often seen hung over the shoulders of wooden Elegba figures in West Africa. In the African context, Eshu is known as the club-bearer and his *Oriki* and the myths about his character explain how he hooked his club over his shoulder to hang down his back. As a colonial addition to Elegguá cult practice in Cuba, Afro-Cuban slaves used *garabatos* on the sugar plantations to carve a pathway enabling them to cut the grass with a machete. In *Caminos* it appears as if two *garabatos* have been bound together like shackles, which may indicate the conditions of slavery and the idea of physical repression, or the persecution of African-derived religions during the epoch of Cuban slavery.

However, Pérez has stressed that she has never been interested in making socio-political comment through her artistic process. For instance, some critics have associated another work of hers, *No zozobra la barca de la vida* (*No danger the boat of life will flounder*) (1995) [Fig.13] with political issues concerning the history of slavery in Cuba and the current *balsero* phenomenon (see Glossary). She categorically refutes this suggestion, emphasising that her work does not deal with political issues. Indeed, she stated that

this particular composition was concerned with the *Santería orisha*, Yemayá (the female deity associated with the sea) and about the person who has Yemayá as their personal deity. As implied by the title, the meaning behind this work relates to the idea that if one's life can be considered as a boat, then Yemayá will help one not to flounder through life.[254]

Other major *orisha*s that Pérez has focused on include Osain **[Fig.14]**, a *Santería* deity associated with plants and herbs. Among the *Yoruba* Osain is known as Osanyin and in his name the *Yoruba* have undertaken a vast study of herbs, leaves and roots found in the forest. They have classified them with regard to their therapeutic properties and combined them to make medicines for initiation. However, in the Cuban context, Osain has become linked to a deeper, more universal belief in the spirituality of the forest, in which the faithful honour *El monte* (*the woods/forest*) as the source of healing power as well as the domain of Osain.

Although the title of Figure.14 refers specifically to Osain, this can be considered as another polysemic piece that highlights the overlap between Afro-Cuban practices and beliefs. It is essential to grasp that in the Cuban context the fusion of ideas that has occurred has not been restricted solely to *Yoruba* and Catholic ideas, African-derived religions have borrowed from each other, a fact admirably demonstrated in the concepts of Osain and the *Ceiba*. As such the herbs and grasses are believed to protect *lucumis*, *mayomberos* and *araras* from death or misfortune. Thus the notion of protection by the manipulation of herbs associated with Osain has evolved to become a universal Cuban theme, entwined within a more profound belief in the forest/mountain. Indeed, *paleros*

[254] Pérez interview 1 March 2000.

and *santeros* use leaves collected from the forest to prepare medicines, as well as for rituals, cures and cult devotions, as these leaves produce *aché* when used in the right combination.

Certain iconographical and mythical elements identified with Osain — *güiro*[255] and feathers[256] — are found in this image. As in other compositions, the artist empowers herself and the image by incorporating herself within the photograph in the guise of her own head to represent the calabash of Osain. Pérez commented that this work made reference to Osain, the god of the mountain, and was concerned with the process of making something anthropomorphic.[257] Her aim by so doing may have been to consider the relevance of Afro-Cuban deities to human existence by visually presenting her head to stand as a representation of Osain. This piece shows the artist's head placed upside down with face turned away from the camera, to physically resemble a hanging calabash, an object associated with this deity. As such her head becomes the ritual object, the *güiro*, containing the *aché* or power.

The works discussed illustrate how Pérez's unique "cosmovisions" include the trace of her own self.[258] Yet she abstracts the concepts in her images so that they can be applied to any person. Pérez's ability has been to eliminate the distance between her artistic work and herself by transforming and metaphorically reconstructing her body into

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[255] Güiros are believed to be explicit symbols of creation. There is a popular Cuban myth that Osain kept Ewe secrets in a *güiro* that hung from a tree, which contained herbs and grasses. The myth stated that the calabash fell and all the *orishas* took the herbs. So although Osain is the owner of all herbs, every *orisha* owns some herbs because they took them for themselves. See Lydia Cabrera, 100.

[256] Robert Farris Thompson, "Icons of the Mind: *Yoruba* Herbalism Arts in Atlantic Perspective," *African Arts* VIII, no. 3 (1975). The symbolism of the feathers may be connected to the ancient Yoruba correlation of Osanyin and birds, as bird forms are an integral part of Osanyin/Osain cult.

[257] Pérez interview, 1994.

[258] Gerardo Mosquera coined the term "cosmovisions" in respect to Pérez's images. My interpretation of this term is that it refers to cosmogonical and philosophical concepts embodied within her images, represented in formal and/or symbolic terms.

sacred, religious, ritual and cultural spaces. The purpose of the inclusion of her body has been to give physical form to and to represent or reinterpret mythical beings, religious concepts and objects in a profound spiritual and universal sense. She is interested in the meanings behind the idea, form or object. In her endeavours, she uses distancing devices, i.e. ritual practices, props, deities and myths, which cut across the predominant representations of women as objects of desire for male consumption. Pérez represents her body as a creator, an altar, a fetish bundle, as well as the incarnation of an *orisha*. This is to make radical comparisons between her and Afro-Cuban objects of power, and in the process her body becomes a ritual and cultural object.

Formal Devices

Although photography has been Pérez's medium of choice throughout her entire career, in the strict sense of the term, Pérez cannot be considered as a photographer because she does not physically take the photographs. It is her husband, Flavio Garcíandia, who is actually responsible for taking the photographs under Pérez's instruction. Pérez sets up the shots and stage sets and carries out the actual performance, and the photograph functions as an intermediary in order to record her performance. What is documented is her performance in front of the camera: it is a direct and synthetic documentation, but at the same time it is loaded with metaphors.

The stage sets she creates for her photographs formally suggest her isolation from the outside world. Through her works she situates herself in uncontaminated spaces to distance herself from the commonplace, and it is these spaces that give her photography such a distinctive aura. Her works offer no recognition of a specific time or place and the

lack of people other than herself adds to the sense of solitude and the characteristic insularity of her photographs.

> "I am not interested in time, space and movement. My images are static, no time — like dreams".[259]

She achieves this sense of timelessness in formal terms by framing each of her compositions with a white aura at their edges. This white edge categorises her photographs as signifiers of a timeless, placeless, natural order, in which the artist focuses on the female body as the in-between zone and place where the universe was generated. In a spiritual and religious sense the artist also honours Obatalá through this white aura.[260] As a major *Yoruba* and *Santería orisha* and the son of Olofi and Olodumare, Obatalá is considered the master of heads. All the *orishas* respect him and look to him for counsel and notions of purity and the colour white are associated with Obatalá and his devotees.[261]

Pérez has made a conscious effort to distance herself from any specific information that associates her photographic works directly with herself. Her aim is to document experiences that could happen to anyone, even if she draws upon her own intimate experiences and spiritual journey in order to do so. She uses her own body in a generic sense in order to convey ideas about human existence and spirituality, to give the impression that it could be anyone in those images.[262] Yet in a fundamental sense her own subjectivity is central to her artistic endeavours. Therefore, her bodily trace is an

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[259] Pérez interview, 1 March 2000.
[260] Turner, "Marta María Pérez Bravo".
[261] Natalia Bolívar, *Los Orishas en Cuba,* (Havana: Ediciónes Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1990), 79–80.
[262] Pérez interview 1 March 2000.

effective method for her to express her spiritual and existential concerns and to represent the sense of solitariness inhabited by the human as a living being.

Pérez views her entire artistic procedure as a holistic and phenomenological endeavour and a fundamental element of private ritual occurs when she puts the sets together for her images. The configuration of the image is always the very last step in her conceptual artistic process. The titles, ideas and the ideological discourse attached to her works are the preliminary and most important stages, and formulating the concept and making drawings are the most enjoyable part of the process for her.[263] Her conceptual emphasis reflects the influence of and her educational training with Flavio Garcíandia and other conceptually orientated professors at the ISA in the 1980s, such as Consuelo Castañeda.

Garcíandia, in particular, nurtured her interest in photography. For her its appeal as an artistic medium lies in its documentary capacity and as an effective way to appropriate the world as she interprets it. Thus her images have reduced the camera to a simple instrument that works as a purely informative mediator. Her photographs enable the viewer to observe actions that are situated in an interstitial space that exists between thoughts and sensations, ideas and feelings, ritual and daily life. Through this approach she maintains a sense of psychological tension in her images, emphasising the subtlety and the communicative fusion between the concept and the visual image. In the interstitial spaces of her photographic works, "the affective and the intellectual live together in a space of ambiguities".[264]

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[263] Ibid.
[264] Cortés, 92.

The trace of her body is often an element visible through the zonification and fragmentation of her body parts, as a method by which she is able to visually achieve the interstitial space she requires.[265] Some images display ambiguous traces of skin and fragmented body zones, which could be read as the transgression of bodily and gendered borders. For instance, the safety pin inserted into her chest in *Amuleto* (*Amulet*) (1989) **[Fig.15]** is meant to act like an amulet and draws upon her previous concerns with maternity and Cuban popular culture and superstition.

"This [Figure.15] is like an amulet. You put them on babies to protect them from bad thoughts. This piece also makes reference to the other series on maternity and elements of superstition".[266]

Another pertinent example is *Ya no hay corazon* (*There's no heart anymore*) (1999) **[Fig.16]**, in which a fragmented section of the artist's torso is visible. This image bears a physical resemblance to a *Nkisi Nkonde* as it is covered in earth with sharp metal objects protruding out. By portraying her body in this manner, Pérez's body becomes the real mythic object in these pieces,[267] set in timeless, interstitial places and spaces.

Moreover, the zonification of her bodily traces often leads to her face being covered, turned away or distorted, as she uses objects such as towels, sheets and jugs effectively as masks.[268] This practice backs up Pérez's assertion that she attempts to de-emphasise the trace of her personal presence, to instead suggest a more generic human body for the purpose of her inquiries. Instead, she seeks to draw upon the most elemental and poetic components associated with the ideas, objects or *orishas*. Works such as *Osain, Para concebir* and *Protección* admirably demonstrate the powerfulness

[265] Robinson, 143.
[266] Pérez interview, 1994.
[267] Molina, "All originates from Foreign Lands," 100.
[268] Cortés, 93.

associated with the presence or absence of Pérez's face and the fragmentation of her body parts within the interstitial spaces of her art production. As a consequence, her images suffer "semiotic mutations" and begin to operate on metaphorical levels, referring to and identifying parts of the body with objects and ideas from the world of *Santería* and other Afro-Cuban religious traditions.[269]

Word and Image

As mentioned already, within Pérez's conceptual artistic enterprise, the titles of the photographs are the first and most important stage of her creative process.[270] They illuminate in regard to the subject matter to which the artist refers by complementing, reinforcing and extending the meanings of the visual images. For example, the religious connection is blatantly indicated in written format in *Cultos parallelos (Altar de Ibeyis)*, and the words "*Parallel cults*" semantically indicate how Catholic symbolism had been outwardly fused with *Yoruba* notions, distinctive of *Santería* iconography and practices. Similarly in *Para concebir*, which translates as "*In order to conceive*," Pérez relates some Cuban popular cultural superstitions, taboos and practices concerning conception to her own experience of pregnancy. She does this by visually juxtaposing images of her pregnant self with written texts in the form of certain old wives tales. This provides visual and textual forms of communication that contradict each other and offset the sentimentality often associated with notions of pregnancy.

In some images in Figure.3, the word-image relationship functions to question the effectiveness of the old wives tale or taboo: the word serves as a linguistic extension of

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[269] Molina, "All originates from Foreign Lands," 101.
[270] Pérez interview, 1 March 2000.

the myth and the photographic image as the visual violation of the taboo. For example, a text stating "*Ni ver o matar los animales*" (*Do not kill nor witness the murder of animals*) in image II is juxtaposed with Pérez's heavily pregnant form brandishing a knife. Similarly, the warning, "It is born suffocated by the cord" is placed onto image I of the artist's torso wearing a necklace worn by *Santería* devotees. The written texts that accompany the images in this series thus provide psychological and visual obstacles, and the word and image intertextuality means that the spectator has to engage in a double deciphering process of the text and the image and the relationship between the two.

Visual Narratives

As discussed earlier, the notion of ritual is intimately bound up with Pérez's art corpus through the creation of the artwork itself and her subject matter. She seeks to make interpretations based upon Afro-Cuban traditions and beliefs that reflect her existential concerns and she utilises various narrative forms to do so. Communicating myth and ritual by narrative structures and using visual metaphors are ways of extending cognition very common in visual art practices. In exploring visual narratives, chronotopes (literally "time spaces") make narrative events concrete and provide the ground for the representation of events. They are characterised by the integration of spatial and temporal axes and the fusion of these indicators.[271] Without such temporal-spatial expressions manifested as signs, meaning could not enter our experience. Therefore, a

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[271] See M.M Bakhtin, "Forms of Time and Chronotope in the Novel," *The Dialogic Imagination*, ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 84–86, 243. Bakhtin coined the term "chronotope" in relation to temporal and spatial determinants. He stated that time thickens, takes on flesh and becomes artistically visible. Likewise, space becomes charged and responsive to the movements of time, plot and history. These temporal and spatial determinants are inseparable from one another and always coloured by emotions and values, so that each motif and separate aspect of the artistic work bears value.

piece of artwork's artistic unity in relationship to an actual reality is defined by its chronotope, because chronotopes function as "primary means for materialising time in space".[272] They are the places where the knots of narrative are tied and untied, and in a representational sense, time effectively becomes palpable and visible. This makes it possible to structure a representation of events in and around chronotopes as points from which scenes can open up.[273]

For instance, *No vi con mis propios ojos* (*I can't see with my own eyes*) (1990) **[Fig.17]** textually connotes the idea of ritual time and space. The monoscenic narrative introduces the audience to a theme of actions that serves as a reference to the narrative centered on a single event.[274] In this case, the narrative concerns the process of becoming an *orisha* devotee and the analogous commitment that exists between parent and child.

> "This is a reference to a link/commitment in relation to one's children. You always have to create a path bearing in mind a lot of things that are often not the most important to you".[275]

Chronotopes, as the places where the knots of narrative are tied and untied, are a valuable method to explore ways in which meaning can enter our experience via works of art and to artistically fix time and space.[276] Moreover, the general dialogical characteristics of chronotopes reside in the fact that they are mutually inclusive and can coexist, be interwoven, replace, oppose or contradict one another and find themselves in even more complex interrelationships.[277]

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[272] Ibid., 250.
[273] Ibid.
[274] Kurt Weitzmann was the first to propose such narrative categories. See *Illustration in Roll and Codex: A Study of the Origin and Method of Text Illustration*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1947).
[275] Pérez interview, December 1994.
[276] Bakhtin, 84–86, 250.
[277] Ibid., 252.

In Figure.17, the chronotope of the threshold is applicable as it is concerned with crisis and break in a life. This is relevant to the artist's transition to motherhood and all that it entails, in an analogous way to the *Santería* initiation process undertaken by initiates. During initiation, the neophytes break with their previous life and symbolically become like children, unable to think or see for themselves. In visual terms, Pérez sought to make an analogy between this religious concept and her own life by placing two *muñequitas*, to represent her twin daughters, strategically over her eye sockets and binding her arms together over her head to suggest a sense of forced compliance.

In *Yoruba* cosmology, the head is associated with one's personal destiny (*Orí*). So through Pérez's visual focus on the head aspect, her submissive body position and the placement of the dolls, she visually reinforces the notion of succumbing to other forces, be they deities or children. The artist's use of the written title in conjunction with the narrative form and iconography employed, raise a valid question in relation to notions of identity that could be posed to a parent or a religious initiate — to whom does this person belong?

These same personal and religious ideas and textual devices are expressed in another piece, *Tres Iyawós* (*Three Iyawós*) (1990) **[Fig.18]**.

"[*Iyawó*] is a name of African origin that makes reference to the initiative rituals of religion and to one's individual fate. *Iyawós* are very dependent on their saint fathers. This is represented in the collar — which is always a symbol of who the person belongs to".[278]

The term *Iyawó* refers to the devotee after the spirit possession initiation process and

[278] Pérez interview, December 1994.

the ceremony of invocation when the *orisha* 'mounts' the *Iyawó*. As in Figure.17, the focus of Figure.18 is Pérez's head and the two *muñequitas*, as well as the multiple beads wrapped over the artist's eyes and round her head. Just as initiation rituals are essential to *Santería* worship, beads are an essential part of the devotees' costumes and the rituals. Beaded necklaces are draped over initiate's bodies to emphasise their dependence on their saint fathers and as symbols of which *orisha* the devotee belongs to. Thus the beads denote status in visual terms, as they are organised on the basis of the specific *orisha's* oracular numbers and sacred colours to identify the *Iyawó* as a newly consecrated locus of *orisha ache.* The beads are also ritually dipped in protective herbal mixtures, so that the act of wearing the beads connects the initiate to the power of the leaves and their specific *orisha.*[279]

Pérez took the dependence aspects associated with these religious rituals to an intimate level in these two works, to make reference to herself and her two daughters as the three *Iyawós* as stated in the title of Figure.18. She makes an analogy between her own individual fate and her role as a mother to her daughters and the relationship between an *orisha* and devotee. In a sense, initiates are dependent upon their saint fathers and *orishas*, as children are dependent upon their parents. Just as the beads and the lack of 'seeing' through one's own eyes represent the fate of the *Santería* initiate as bound to a specific *orisha*, so Pérez's iconography represents her own fate as bound to her children and vice versa.

It is very apparent that as integral elements of her *Weltanschauung*, religious traditions, especially Afro-Cuban ones, are an effective way for this artist to express what being

[279] Thompson, 54.

Cuban means to her in relation to the universal human condition. Pérez could not imagine life without the Afro-Cuban religions and she has commented that otherwise existence would seem extremely cold to her and without spirituality; like theatre.[280] Her aim is to portray religious and spiritual ideas and practices in as realistic a way as possible. In the process she attempts to bring out the very essence of the object/idea/*orisha* that she recreates, by using the correct elements, which have a specific meaning in those religious contexts. At the same time, her images suggest concepts, symbols and metaphors that move beyond the reference material they are derived from.

Pérez's conceptual and analytical focus can fruitfully be seen as embodying an important trend of the new art from the 1980s: a focus on issues of ethicity. Her ethical preoccupations concern human conduct in a general sense, a faith in human betterment and the absence of nihilism and alienation in peoples' lives.[281] Her work is concerned with the parallelism between this lived mortal world and the spiritual realm. It evokes "a humanistic questioning of pragmatic logic and moral concepts," [282] with her body placed at the very centre of her enquiry. As such her photographic creations are her interpretation of *her* world: a reality where myth, ritual and spirituality play active roles within contemporary life as part of everyday Cuban existence. Although the references relate to specific Cuban religious traditions and so may be difficult to comprehend for an audience unfamiliar with these practices on one level. This artist draws upon a 'common

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[280] Pérez interview, 1 March 2000.
[281] Mosquera, "14 Sons," 42.
[282] Gerald Matt, ed., "Beyond Time," *Cuba – Maps of Desire*, trans. Lisa Rosenblatt (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 38.

vocabulary,' which she utilises to express universal feelings and emotions, and to connect her with all spiritual and faithful people on another level.[283]

Belkis Ayón

As with Pérez's art production, Belkis Ayón's distinctly Cuban subject matter also encompasses universal human concerns, referring to gender, religion and myth. Both artists have consistently utilised Afro-Cuban themes as their subject matter, although Ayón remained faithful solely to the Afro-Cuban *Abakuá* society for her entire career. She also made a very personal physical and emotional connection to a specific *Abakuá* character, in contrast to Pérez's more generic interest in Afro-Cuban traditions, deities and practices. Indeed, without the reference of the *Abakuá*, it would be hard to penetrate some of the complexities of Ayón's artistic imagery, as she creates a world of multiple references and bodily traces based on her self-perception and this Afro-Cuban cult. Indeed, her knowledge of the society's beliefs and practices was very important in the iconography she employed. For instance, she utilised specific figures, signs, objects, animals, plants and the society's myths to remain true to the workings of the religion in her art endeavours.

Therefore before discussing Ayón's artistic corpus in depth, it is necessary to briefly set out the mythological background surrounding the Cuban *Abakuá* society. There are a number of versions of the *Abakuá* myths of origin, but the main points relate to Sikán, an *Efut* princess, who went to the river to fetch water every day and caught a fish in the calabash she had left under a palm by the riverbank. The fish was believed to be the spirit of an ancient king of *Ejagham*, Tanze, or it represented God himself. By placing

[283] Turner.

the calabash on her head Sikán became sacred herself, through contact with the presence of the almighty fish.

One version of the myth holds that two snakes were sent out by a witch man to find the fish after it disappeared from the water. Sikán was scared by the snakes and dropped the gourd containing the sacred fish. The fish that Sikán had collected in her calabash died and the grand *Efut* priest, Nasakó, began a rite to recapture its spirit within a sacred object so that its voice might be heard again. The first group gathered under the palm by the river and Nasakó removed the skin of the fish and traced the first symbol (*anaforuana*) of the society on its skin. Then Nasakó initiated the seven sons of *Ngbe* over the skin of Tanze and the skin was placed over the calabash, but the voice was very weak. Tanze spoke through Nasakó's divining instrument and proclaimed that Sikán's blood was needed to make the voice stronger, so Nasakó ordered Sikán's sacrifice. Sikán was subsequently sacrificed beneath the palm and entombed there. The fusion of Sikán and Tanze within the object allowed the sacred voice to be heard and the religion was founded.

Historically, specific Cuban intellectuals have played vital roles in mediating knowledge and the written discourse available to visual artists about Afro-Cuban religious traditions. Cuban anthropologist, Fernando Ortíz (1881–1969) was a key intellectual figure in this scholarly research,[284] as was his colleague and fellow anthropologist, Lydia Cabrera whom Ayón acknowledged as a very important source for her own work. Along with

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[284] Ortíz's prolific studies over the course of a career spanning five decades contributed enormously to the field of Afro-Cuban studies. He produced some of the most comprehensive and detailed analyses of Afro-Cuban music, dance and cultural history. Furthermore, his anthropological research led to the revival in the 1920s of the African-derived *Abakuá* society, which had been banned since 1903. See Vera Kutzinsky, *Sugar's Secrets: Race and the Erotics of Cuban Nationalism,* (Charlottesville, VA and London: University Press of Virginia, 1993), 141.

Ortíz, Cabrera remains one of the central figures of Cuban culture and her corpus represents a great source on Afro-Cuban religions, with many of her books considered classics. Moreover, she tackled Afro-Cuban topics that are still very relevant and important for contemporary artists and intellectuals, and it has been said that she exerts "a special influence among many current artists," [285] which is demonstrated by Pérez's reliance on the anthropologist's research for her artistic processes. Ayón also stated that a very close relationship exists between the visions presented in her compositions and the secret society as transmitted in the work of Cabrera.[286]

Cabrera recognised the value and importance of the many African-derived religious and cultural components to the make-up of the Cuban nation and the nation's dual ancestral legacy of Spanish and African derivation. She made it her life's work to document and investigate this rich African heritage, and is universally recognised as the leading authority on Afro-Cuban religions because of her very thorough research methods and subsequent corpus of work.

Not only did her investigations cover all aspects of Afro-Cuban religious and cultural practices; she documented these beliefs, traditions and rituals through the words of her Afro-Cuban informants. Among the many topics she researched were *Yoruba* and *Bantu* languages in Cuba; *Santeria* and *lucumí* traditions and beliefs; precious stones in Afro-Cuban traditions; specific *Yoruba orishas*; the religious beliefs and traditions of *Palo Monte* and *Arará*; animals in Afro-Cuban religions and folklore; traditional Afro-Cuban herbal medicines and ancient proverbs. She also produced several works devoted

[285] Turner.
[286] Belkis Ayón, "Confeciones," text forming part of Ayón's ISA thesis, *Recuerdo Sagrado*, (Havana: ISA, *n.p.*, 1991). "Considero que existe una relación muy cercana entre la visión que les ofresco y la de la Sociedad Secreta Abakuá transmitida nítidamente en la obra de Lydia Cabrera".

entirely to the all-male secret society *Abakuá*. However, she admitted that the research into the *Abakuá* society for these works was the most difficult she had undertaken.[287] The resulting books were unique and included detailed knowledge regarding the African origins of the society and its structure, its initiation symbols and rituals and a study of the society's sacred and secret language.

Ayón's final ISA thesis "*Recuerdo Sagrado*" (*Sacred Memory*) draws on Cabrera's *Abakuá* research and her title relates to the ideas and ethos behind Cabrera's 1970 *Abakuá* text.[288] The title of Cabrera's 1970 work stated it was "narrated by old Cuban adepts/practitioners," who carried with them the ancient knowledge of their African forebears' practices. I suggest Ayón drew inspiration from the specific methodology that Cabrera employed in her research and the validity the anthropologist placed on Afro-Cubans' personal accounts of oral legends and histories as valuable and worthy cultural records in themselves. The meaning of Ayón's thesis title may refer to the reconstitution of the West African *Ngbe/Ekpe* society in the Cuban context as seen through the recollections of those Cubans brought from Africa and their memories of the religious rituals, traditions, secrets, ceremonies, myths and history associated with the religion.

As with Pérez's understanding of Afro-Cuban practices and beliefs, reading *El Monte* was momentous and vital for Ayón in terms of learning about the legend of Sikán in particular.[289] However, it was Enrique Sosa's research that allowed Ayón to more fully

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[287] Lydia Cabrera in a letter written to Katherine Dunham, May 22, 1969, (Miami: Cuban Heritage Collection, accessed 27 October 2003) ; available from http://digital.library.miami.edu/chcdigital/chc0339/chc0339_mss3.shtml

[288] Lydia Cabrera, *La Sociedad Secreta Abakuá — Narrada Por Viejos Adeptos*, (Miami: Ediciones C.R., 1970).

[289] David Mateo, "Conversación Irregular," *Siempre Vuelvo: Grabados de Belkis Ayón,* (Havana: *n.p.*, 1993), quoting Ayón. "En lo que a la leyenda de la Sikán se refiere, considero que fue trascendental la lectura que hice del libro "El Monte" de Lidia Cabrera, aunque mi conciencia sobre el episodio fue total cuando estudié "Los Ñañigos" de Enrique Sosa".

understand this topic and it was from his work that the artist actually drew the specific term "*Recuerdo Sagrado*" for her thesis title.[290] Unlike Cabrera, Sosa's scholarly work involved in-depth textual research drawing on many academic sources, including Cabrera, and his work deals with the origins and expansion of the society in West Africa, its economic, social and political implications and the relationship between the various ethnic groupings involved with it. It also sets out the internal organisation of the *Abakuá* society, including the hierarchy of the *obones* (*the chiefs*) and their signs and responsibilities, the myths of origin, *Nsibidi* and a comparative analysis of terminology between the African and Cuban contexts.

Despite the scholarly research on this subject by esteemed academics, the *Abakuá* society has had a long and chequered past in Cuba and it remains a problematic topic, with access to textual information about it officially restricted despite the society's ubiquitousness in Cuba. It is still officially banned, and is, by its very nature, shrouded in secrecy and mystery. Therefore, in order for Ayón to research and gain access to scholarly information on the *Abakuá* by authors like Cabrera and Sosa, it was necessary for her to obtain a letter of authorisation from her art college, San Alejandro. This situation highlights the problem of who can gain access to specific information in Cuba. As an Afro-Cuban female citizen, the libraries in Havana had denied Ayón access to books written by Cuban intellectuals on this subject. Yet she was able to access such information as an artist at San Alejandro. This indicates that a sense of eliteness is associated with visual artists in the post-revolutionary period that does not derive from

[290] Enrique Sosa, *Los Ñañigos*, (Havana: Ediciónes Casa de las Américas, 1982), 452. This work was awarded 1st prize by the Casa de las Americas in 1982.

their class or social background, but from the place occupied by the established visual arts tradition within Cuban society.

More specifically, the fact that access was granted via Ayón's academic art institution serves to indicate the prestige associated with San Alejandro. As an artist from that esteemed institution Ayón was placed in an elite position. This would suggest that entry into the higher echelons of the Cuban art system is a determining factor regarding access to socially restricted information. It is possible to conclude that written information about the *Abakuá*, produced by a pre-revolutionary intellectual elite, continues to be reserved for a post–1959 Cuban intellectual and artistic elite.

Although the theme of *Abakuá* has had a complex history in Cuba, Ayón's individual appropriation reflects the particular ideologies and practices associated with the 1980s Cuban art scene. From a technical viewpoint Ayón completed her art studies in the early 1990s. It might be natural to therefore assume that she was associated with the 1990s, or "third generation" of the new Cuban artists, although in reality she began to take part in international exhibitions and won accolades from her student days in the 1980s. When she began working with *Abakuá* mythology and iconography in 1985, Ayón was picking up on the trend begun by seminal 1980s artists including José Bedia, Ricardo Rodríguez Brey and Marta María Pérez. All of them worked with Afro-Cuban derived imagery and concepts at the ISA in the early to mid–1980s, but as previously discussed in relation to Pérez's experiences it was still a new phenomenon and not yet fully accepted.

It is possible that from her artistic position Ayón sought to inform about the *Abakuá* religion, as Cabrera had done earlier in Cuba's history, and to promulgate ideas about the society. The artist was well aware she was treading on precarious ground with her choice of subject matter. Her professor at San Alejandro, Pablo Borges warned Ayón during her student days that dealing with the *Abakuá* cult and its *anaforuanas* as an artistic topic could have serious implications for her.[291] I presume Borges was referring to the fact that the society has a reputation as violent, esoteric and protective. And, as a woman, Ayón was placed in an even more precarious position in relation to the society than a male researcher.

Yet despite the overt association with African-derived concepts in her compositions, Ayón emphasised that the meanings in her works were not direct, but that they were allusive and negotiated many times from their African origins, rather like she was. As an observer of the *Abakuá* religion, the iconography she invented to illustrate the *Abakuá* myths was taken from her specific viewpoint as an 'outsider' to the rituals, to create imagery that extended beyond merely a reenactment of *Abakuá* mythology. By the term 'outsider,' I mean to suggest that Ayón was a well-informed researcher of the *Abakuá,* but she would never have been accepted into the religion because of her gender. In that sense, despite her efforts to understand the religion, she was placed on the outside and privy only to certain levels of knowledge. It was hard for her to penetrate the society and she was reliant upon textual sources, although like Cabrera, she also had *Abakuá* informants but she was very discreet about them.

[291] Mateo quoting Ayón. "...Pablo Borges, que era en aquel entonces mi profesor, me dijo con el ánimo de impresionarme, que lo que estaba hacinedo me podria traer serias implicaciones..."

Like fellow *mulato* artist, Wifredo Lam (1902–1982) from the pre–1959 era, Ayón chose not to draw upon the exoticised and stereotypical paraphernalia associated with this African-derived religion as an artistic means of expressing her sense of Cubanness. Lydia Cabrera was largely responsible for motivating Lam's shift to Afro-Cuban themes upon his return from Europe to Cuba in 1941. Cabrera had been researching Afro-Cuban myths and religious practices and she took Lam to *bembes* and discussed Afro-Cuban ritual ceremonies with him.[292] She also wrote articles for the art section of Havana's leading newspaper in which she introduced Lam and elaborated on the Afro-Cuban content in his work.[293]

As with artists in the post–1980 period, and unlike the vast majority of his pre-revolutionary contemporaries, Afro-Cuban Lam grew up in a working class *barrio* in an environment of *Santería* practice, even though he was not a practitioner of Afro-Cuban religious practices. Also, unlike his 1940s Cuban contemporaries, Lam's approach to using Afro-Cuban themes was different. In reference to his artwork, he stated that his artistic effort would never be a variant of the popular versions of Afro-Cuban culture found in the work of other Cuban artists at that time. He refused to paint what he termed as the "cha-cha-cha".[294] By this statement, Lam was probably referring to the stereotypical African-derived cultural elements that his white artistic peers mostly drew upon.

Therefore, Lam has been acknowledged as the artist who brought about a change of sensibility in terms of the communication of Afro-Cuban cultural meanings, and which

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[292] Julia P Herzberg, "Wifredo Lam: The Development of a Style and Worldview: The Havana Years 1941–1952," *Wifredo Lam and his Contemporaries, 1938–1952, ed. Maria R Balderrama (New York: Harry N Abrams, 1992)*, 39.
[293] Ibid., 47.
[294] David Craven, "The Visual Arts since the Cuban Revolution," *Third Text* 20 (1992): 98.

proved to be a decisive and crucial development in the use of Afro-Cuban themes in Cuban visual art practices.[295] Moreover, Lam used Modernism as a space to communicate Afro-American cultural meanings, and as such he is considered the first plastic artist in western art history (and in Cuban history) to have done so.[296]

Ayón has been the only contemporary Cuban artist to concentrate solely on the *Abakuá* in her highly original engravings. She attempted to evoke the meanings and mystical contents associated with the *Abakuá* through a complex codification of materials, iconography and medium. She knew the myths, the characters, the symbols and the rituals of the male secret society through her in-depth textual research and informants. This subject matter and the artist's very specific formal methods helped her to emphasise this particular component of Cuban culture, which was not well known outside of Cuba and was associated with some fear and danger within Cuba.

Furthermore, Ayón established a spiritual identification in her work, which allowed her to transgress the exclusion of female participation in the society's rites. This provided her with the artistic licence to incorporate any personal experience she wished into her images, utilising *Abakuá* mythology as the pretext for comparisons to real life and from which to consider existential, emotional and spiritual questions.[297] She took advantage of the aesthetic possibilities implied in that living mythological body of thought and projected those myths onto her own life and reality.

Ayón's corpus can be read as part of her philosophical inquiries into the general nature

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[295] Mosquera, "Elegguá," 228.
[296] Ibid., 228–229.
[297] Mateo quoting Ayón. "Me parece que la temática Abakuá va a ser por un buen tiempo el punto de partida, el pretexto para las comparaciones con la vida".

of human existence and the exploration of her own subjectivity. In this process her theoretical and artistic interest focused predominantly on the female aspect of the male-dominated *Abakuá* cult. She intertwined the myths, social cosmogony and her particular feminine perspective to connote messages about her understanding of the society and her own existential uncertainty. She sought to bring forth exploratory and speculative angles on the nature of the society, and she sought to define her identity through her own bodily trace transposed onto the figure of Sikán. As the leitmotif in the vast majority of her compositions, the artist related to this female character in a very personal manner. Ayón was very clear about the physical and spiritual closeness she felt toward Sikán and she represented this figure in various guises, all of which could point toward Ayón's notion of "being in the world".

The close association between Sikán and the artist led her to probe and question her own personal, cultural and social existence in analogous ways to Sikán*'s* role within the *Abakuá* society. Ayón portrayed Sikán in varying guises: sacrificial victim, all-powerful divine female presence and martyr. All or any of these aspects could potentially have important implications relating to Ayón's own subjective reality because the subject of her work was her personal story, created by her in self-reflective works that dealt with a very male dominated sphere.

Ayón's personalisation of the figure of Sikán was formally reiterated by the use of her own bodily outline as the model for this female character. Ayón further emphasised this point by commenting that Sikán's outline continuously changed and passed with her

from one condition of her life to another, reflecting her personal situation.[298] Furthermore, she stated in relation to her use of Sikán that her attention was particularly drawn to the notion of the female as a victim and the connotations that could be derived from such a situation.[299]

However, she categorically denied that her work was a Feminist conception, although her imagery does take possession of profoundly masculine myths that she reinterpreted from her particular feminine perspective.[300] She also reevaluated Sikán's role within the structure of the *Abakuá* society and highlighted its fundamental feminine aspect by visually re-exposing the exclusion of the female element. In a sense she sought to re-insert the feminine ideal into *Abakuá*,[301] or rather, she publicly acknowledged it.

In respect of this supposed Feminist intention in her artistic endeavours, Ayón's intention was never to reproach the secret brotherhood, but to respect and promulgate it in its broadest cultural sense.[302] But it remains that as a woman Ayón undertook the task of plastically recreating this religious sect, which could be construed as almost provocative, even more so as the iconography she proposed reiterated the importance of the woman at the heart of the *Abakuá* society. Indeed, as a society closed to women, it is curious that Ayón has been the only artist to concentrate on the *Abakuá* in a profound way.

Ayón's opinions were deemed as heretical in relation to the accepted *Abakuá* mythology

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[298] Ibid. "Es cierto que soy la modelo de mis figuraciones. Ellas pasan conmigo de un estado a otro continuamente, y hasta bajan de peso a la par que yo".

[299] Mateo. "...y lo que más me ha llamado la atención siempre es la condición de victima del personaje femenino, pero desde una posición más bien genérica, sopesando las connotaciones que pudieran derivarse de tal situación.

[300] Mateo quoting Ayón. "Yo jamás he pensado que mi obra sea feminista. Nunca he tenido ese calificativo ciertamente incorporado"

[301] Mateo. "¿Recuerdas cuando te decía aquello de que incertabas un ideal feminista donde nunca lo hubo?

[302] Mateo quoting Ayón. "Mi posición no ha sido nunca la de recriminar la cofradía, sino por el contrario la de respetarla y promulgarla en su sentido cultural más amplio".

and it has been suggested that her reinterpreted versions of the *Abakuá* myths are subversive. But she considered the *Abakuá* society as a philosophically poignant model of male domination, and an example of something that could be found in many forms and in many societies.[303] She sought to probe whether from the "depths of the mytho-poetic Cuban memory," the antecedents of the present day marginality of Cuban women could be deduced, not only within the frame of the *Abakuá* society, but in terms of the patriarchal bent of contemporary Cuban society as a whole.[304]

Furthermore, in respect of the critical, dialogic and ethical dimensions assigned to Cuban contemporary art practice, the question is raised as to what interpreted meanings can be drawn from Ayón's collographs? If one places Ayón in the context of 1990s Cuban art developments, when the meaning of Cuban art began to become highly metaphorical and ambivalent, her sources of iconography and imagery could be very telling and have many possible ramifications. She dealt with religion, gender, race and marginalisation in her artistic processes. Thus her art production begs the question; did she feel a sense of societal/racial marginality linked to her African-derived background based on gender and/or race issues? Indeed, her use of this esoteric, multi-layered topic could have had deep resonance for her own life, in terms of considering the parameters of gender, culture and race in Cuban society in relation to her perceived sense of place within the Cuban social framework.

By utilising the mythology of the secret male African-derived society from the specific perspective of the only female protagonist and by aligning herself to this character, Ayón

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[303] Orlando Hernandez, "Belkis Ayón — The Illusory Rectification of a Myth," Catalogue (*Trabajando P'al Inglé*), (London: *n.p.*, 1999).
[304] Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, "Belkis Ayón: The Revelation of a Secret," (Havana: *n.p.*, 1991).

could have been making a powerful artistic statement about her own strengths, suffering and marginalisation within Cuban society as an Afro-Cuban female. With hindsight, Ayón's comments about how she was able to mask her own despair or unhappiness from people in a visible sense, but that her feelings became evident through her large calligraphic prints, take on an added dimension.

> "...I fell into a state of total despair, although visibly imperceptible — something typical of my moderate personality — except when I am laughing or creating the large calligraphic prints". [305]

Moreover, Ayón's comments with regard to her self-representation in her images via the figure of Sikán is also poignant. For Ayón, these figures were the only way to make amendments and get even, although she conceded she lived a less mythical life than Sikán.[306] In the foreword to her 1998 exhibit at The Couturier gallery in Los Angeles, Ayón stated that she had been feeling increasingly restless and it was something that had unconsciously begun to appear in her work. She explained that,

> She [Sikán], like me, lived and lives through me in restlessness, looking insistently for a way out.[307]

But what amendments and restlessness did Ayón refer to, and a way out from what? The ways in which she portrayed the origins, myths and the characters involved with the society can perhaps shed light on these questions.

In terms of male characters, Ayón's bodily representations of *Abakuá* leopard man in her images were characters that she consciously identified with imposing power and

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[305] Belkis Ayón, "Foreword," Catalogue (*Belkis Ayón: Desasosiego/Restlessness*), (Los Angeles: *n.p.*, 1998).
[306] Mateo quoting Ayón. "Ellas son la única alternativa de desquite, o de corrección, aligerando un poco el término, con la que puedo contar en la realidad; sin embargo yo vivo una vida menos mítica, existo desde una perspectiva mucho más objetiva, mucho más práctica.
[307] Ayón, "Foreword".

aggression. In contrast to her representation of the figure of Sikán, with a narrowed waist and curved hips, she portrayed male *Abakuá* figures as silhouetted straight-bodied 'machos' in an untitled piece from 1993 **[Fig.19]**. The macho qualities she attached to the *Abakuá* leopard men could have been her comment on deeply entrenched, underlying *machista* attitudes in Cuban society, a subject that fellow Afro-Cuban artist, Magdalena Campos-Pons was also concerned about in the 1980s. Ayón created formal tension between the figures and the background in some collographs such as Figure.19. These give the impression that the bodies are pushing out away from the work, analogous perhaps to Belkis Ayón and Cuban women in general pushing against the *machista* attitudes ingrained within the Cuban male psyche?

Ayón stated that *Arrepentida* (*Repentant*) (1993) **[Fig.20]**, represented a central image of Sikán, with numerous white arms tearing at her skin as a symbol of the ambivalence between what we want to be and what we are in reality.[308] The title implies regret for past sins, and the artist focused in a formal sense on the bodily action of tearing the skin away from the body, however the image appears flat, unnatural and unrealistic. There is no bodily trace to suggest the actual discomfort caused by such an action, such as the existence of blood, wounds or internal bodily mechanisms, and the colours used also disguised the violent reality of such an action. An extra set of grey arms attached to Sikán, with both palms facing out toward the viewer, allude to the sense of duality, confusion and the contradictions the artist wanted to portray. There is a small set of beads entwined in one set of hands and a light grey circular motif placed on the upturned palm of the other. The head of another figure is barely visible in the bottom left

[308] Mateo, quoting Belkis Ayón. "Te podría poner el ejemplo de la obra "Arrepentida," que fue una de las premiadas en el reciente Encuentro de Grabado, en ella una mujer aparece desgarrándose la piel como símbolo de la ambivalencia entre lo que queremos ser y lo que somos realmente".

corner of the composition, a dark grey scaled, white-eyed figure who clasps a necklace that seems to include a cross and the hands are placed on top of the head. This piece's background consists of swirling, nebulous shapes of black and grey, which camouflage Sikán's pair of grey hands and the shadowy figure at the bottom.

Ayón's comments about her connection to Sikán, combined with the textual and visual imagery present in Figure.20 could be poignant in relation to the artist's desire to shed her skin and to remove her physical outer appearance: effectively, to be someone else. If so, it could mean that Ayón was making a personal, racial, religious, social, cultural and/or politically motivated statement in this piece about being Cuban, and/or being an Afro-Cuban and/or being female or just about the pressure to be someone or something other than she was.

Many of Ayón's works drew upon Christian iconography as well as *Abakuá* mythology and ritual to emphasise the combination of occidental and African elements fused in the recreation of the secret society in the Cuban context. She employed syncretic religious iconography to create polysemic images and metaphorical associations in order to transmit the process of negotiation and syncretism the *Abakuá* society encountered in the process of transference to Cuba from its African origins. In the process the artist portrayed Sikán and the metonymical and metaphorical associations between the female *Abakuá* figure and certain Christian religious characters that may also relate to the artist's *Weltanschauung*.

The use of syncretic Christian/*Abakuá* was a method for her to express her personal spirituality and universal ideas with richness and clarity and she created links between

characters and ideas from these religious traditions based on their equivalence.[309] In formal and iconographic terms the artist's use of fish scales or snakeskin on the grey headed figure and the action of peeling off skin in Figure.20 have associations of shedding one's old life/skin for something new. Perhaps Ayón deliberately made this imagery ambiguous so that the representation of fish and/or snake scales could have relevance for both the Christian and *Abakuá* religious traditions? By doing this she highlighted the sense of hybridisation that occurred in the Cuban religious context and the overlap in subject matter and ideas. Furthermore, presenting Sikán with scales that could be derived from fish or snake also served as an analogy to indicate the ambiguous and contradictory nature of the female figure within the society.

Through the representation of Sikán's body as fish scaled, the artist could have sought to reiterate the mythology surrounding the origins of the society and the underlying power and union of Sikán and Tanze at its heart. If Ayón intended to suggest snake scales, it would reaffirm the victimised aspect of Sikán and the origins of the society, as snakes were sent to hunt her down according to *Abakuá* legend. Alternatively or simultaneously, the snake imagery could refer to the Christian concepts of evil and temptation and their association with the female and snakes.

The beads evident in this work, held by different sets of hands, could represent Catholic rosaries, especially the one containing the cross, and the pattern in Sikán's palm could represent the stigmata: the wounds on the body of a human person that reproduce the wounds of the crucified Christ. In the Christian religion stigmata are particularly

[309] Ibid. "El universo que encierran sus personajes e incidentales narrativas se basta por si solo para prefigurar cualquier motivo de la existencia humana, equivalencia que he empezado a vislumbrar mucho más ahora con los estudios de relación que estoy llevando a cabo entre la mítica Abakuá y la religiosidad cristiana, con el propósito de crear algo así como una especie de santidad personal".

associated with St Francis of Assisi. I suggest, however, that the generic Christian meaning of stigmata and the association with Christ and his sacrifice were important for Ayón in relation to the religious parallels she made between Christianity and *Abakuá*, as both Sikán and Christ suffered and were sacrificed. Moreover in Ayón's works, the cross sign refers not only to the Christian cross, the stigmata and Christ, but also to the *Abakuá* supreme Creator deity, Abasi, who is represented in Cuba by a large cross placed on the main altar table inside the *Famba*. In the Cuban context, the existence of Abasi is said to underscore *Abakuá*/Christian syncretism, as it is believed that Abasi is the Christian God whose entrance strengthens the *Abakuá*.[310]

The austere looking grey-scaled head visible in the bottom left corner of Figure.20 appears to be male, in line with the artist's formal depictions of *Abakuá* members in her compositions. This figure, with its arms crossed over the head in an unyielding position and the eyes staring directly out of the collograph toward the viewer, could suggest the notion of being watched or judged for ones actions. The grey tones of this figure blend in with the background, making it difficult to see him clearly, which may formally allude to the secrecy surrounding *Abakuá* and its members, as well as the idea of being watched by someone/something that cannot be easily seen. In relation to the artist's comments about this piece, its title and iconography, this composition could relate to the idea of being watched and judged for one's life and actions from a religious, cultural, political and/or personal standpoint.

Syncretic imagery is very prevalent in Ayón's compositions and the cross motif is

[310] Sosa, 170–171. "Su existencia subraya el sincretismo ñañigo-cristiano... se representa en Cuba por el crucifijo y se dice que es el dios cristiano cuya entrada fortaleció a abakuá".

repeated throughout the artist's corpus. By including this sign in *La sentencia* (*The sentence*) (1993) **[Fig.21]**, she made an overt connection between Sikán and another Christian religious figure. In this composition, the artist depicts a centrally positioned Sikán with fish-like skin bound by rope or chains to a large tree by her hands and neck. Two additional arms surround her with crosses placed in the centre of their palms. As well as being bound Sikán is being threatened by two white snakes, adding to the sense of her victimisation. In addition to *Abakuá* mythological symbolism regarding the snakes, in Christian iconography the image of a snake wound around a trunk is held to represent sin, evil and death.

In reference to this work the artist stated that there is a parallel between Sikán and the Roman Christian martyr, Saint Sebastian. Like Sikán, Saint Sebastian was tied to a tree and sentenced to die for her 'crimes', but was ultimately sanctified.[311] In everyday Cuban life, people have a relationship with the Catholic Saints and they identify with particular ones, which may explain Ayón's analogy between Saint Sebastian, Sikán and herself. Within the canons of western art history, the theme of Saint Sebastian is a well-known one. By drawing on this Christian theme Ayón aligned herself with western artistic traditions, but she recontextualised the notion of this Christian martyr to create an analogy between him and Sikán. This signifies that Sikán was sacrificed for the *Abakuá* society, as Saint Sebastian was for the Christian faith.

In an untitled collograph (1993) **[Fig.22]**, the cross motif is placed on the forehead of the centrally placed Sikán figure and on the palms of the other emerging Sikán figure. The

[311] Handwritten note from Belkis Ayón, meeting with the author, Este Havana, 3 January 1995, to accompany the artist's works being photographed. "Cuentan que los mayores castigos, así como los sacrificios se hacian en los árboles. .Aquí está Sikán atada al Árbol como San Sebastian condenada a muerte, santificada además y amenazada por dos serpientes".

two Sikán figures present in this work represent two opposing aspects of this character as well as syncretic religious iconography combined within one image. One figure, the sacrificial victim with hands bound behind her back, indicates Sikán's duty to the society, and the all-powerful feminine presence in the centre of the composition represents another facet of Sikán's character.

In another untitled work (1993) **[Fig.23],** a small centrally placed figure of Sikán is placed over the chest of a large blindfolded *Abakuá* member with a geometric medallion hanging from his neck. The unusual crosshatched type of halo the main figure in Figure.23 is wearing is another polysemic sign. Halos are the attribute of sanctity in Christian art that identifies important personages. The Christian symbol of making holy and identifying important personages with a halo is valid in this context, as Ayón commented that this figure was made holy by including the halo over his head.[312] But this particular form of the halo also suggests *Abakuá* textual sources as an influencing factor on her knowledge and interpretations about the society.

The texture of the halo and its patterning is similar to the crosshatched cloth featured in an early twentieth century Cuban text.[313] Halos, consisting of small diamond shaped areas with tiny circles and crosses placed inside them, were used in older styles of *diablito* costumes associated with *Abakuá* members. This form of patterning — crosses/circles set within various kinds of geometric and curved grid formats — are common motifs found in *Abakuá anaforuanas* (*signs and signatures*) **[Figs.24/25]**. These circle and cross patterns and the crosshatching are also found on the palms of

[312] Ibid. "Aquí está el hombre que está dentro de la religión, santificado (alo)...".
[313] Israel Castellanos, "El 'Diablito' Ñañigo [1928]," *Archivos del folklore cubano* 3, 27–37. Castellanos discussed various types of materials and patterns used in *diablito* costumes.

the black silhouetted figure of Sikán located behind the medallion image in Figure.23. The placement of these designs is indicative of the stigmata, which as discussed can be read as bodily symbols of Sikán's spiritual identity with Christ and their shared notion of sacrifice.

There is also a plethora of ancient sacred *Abakuá* places and iconography found in Ayón's work, as seen in the medallion image in Figure.23. The artist considered it essential to recreate this iconography — the hill, river and palm tree — in her collographs in order for the significance of the signs to be understood.

> "Por el conocimiento y potestad de los signos, hace del pasado presente, recrea la loma, el río, la palma, en los lugares sagrados de *Awána Bekúra Mendó*".[314]

As well as understanding the meaning of the signs, the notion of Sikán as sacrificial victim and as an all-powerful female presence has been highlighted through her compositions, as discussed in relation to Figure.22, as well as in another untitled piece, **[Fig.26]** (1993). A large-scale figure of this female character with a goat balanced over her shoulder forms the central feature of this composition, and a medallion in the very centre of the canvas depicts another image of Sikán holding a goat. In both representations, Sikán's body positioning suggests protecting and nurturing, as she holds the goat as a mother would hold a small child. Ayón used the goat image in metaphorical relation to Sikán with regard to the notion of sacrifice. For her, Sikán and the goat are the same; Sikán was initially sacrificed for the society and in present day

[314] Ayón, "Confeciones". The Awána Bekúra Mendó were an old river tribe, one of the founders of the religion. See Lydia Cabrera, *La Lengua Sagrada de los Ñañigos*, (Miami: Ediciones C.R., 1988), 84.

Abakuá ceremonies the goat is sacrificed.[315]

Sacrifice is the most crucial and fundamental of rites and sacrificial rites are based on two substitutions. The first is provided by the generative violence that substitutes one single member drawn from the community as a "surrogate-victim" for the entire community — Sikán was such a surrogate-victim. The second is the ritualistic substitution of a victim for the surrogate-victim. In the case of the *Abakuá* the goat has become the ritual substitute for Sikán, the "ritual-victim". [316] This means that the original sacrificial act against Sikán (the surrogate-victim) is repeated in commemorative *Abakuá* rites with an identical victim — the goat (the ritual-victim).

The objective of such sacrificial rituals in general is the proper reenactment of the surrogate-victim mechanism. Its function is to perpetuate or renew the effects of this mechanism and to keep violence outside the community. The surrogate-victim mechanism operates so that the victim dies in order that a renewed cultural order occurs. In other words, the surrogate-victim's death bestows new life on men.[317] In the case of the *Abakuá*, the unanimous act of violence directed against Sikán, the 'surrogate-victim' and subsequently against the 'ritual-victim' in the form of the goat, is the guarantor of cultural stability, as sacrifices are continual rites of stability and stasis within a community. Moreover, the goat as the ritual substitute is marginal to the *Abakuá* community, placed both inside and outside of it. As Girard set out, this marginal quality is crucial to the proper functioning of sacrifice within a religious context. [318]

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[315] Ibid. "Sikán y mbori (chivo) significan lo mismo. Sikán fue sacrificada en las ceremonias su lugar lo ocupo el chivo (porqué con su piel se obturo el sonido que emitia el pez "el himpla — del leopardo)".
[316] See Girard, 269–271, 300, for an explanation of sacrifice and ritual substitutes
[317] Ibid., 255.
[318] Ibid., 92, 280.

Formal Devices

Like Pérez and the black and white photographic medium, Belkis Ayón worked consistently in the same format and medium throughout her artistic career and the unique type of collography she employed became her signature format. As an exceptional printmaker, Ayón's name became synonymous with printmaking in Cuba. Her large-scale collographs consisted of an innovative engraving technique, which she created as a result of the lack of traditional printing materials available in Cuba during the 1980s. Although she had access to many more traditional printmaking materials in subsequent years through work and travel, she continued to use the method that had made her art production so distinctive.

Collography is a type of engraving technique that consists of printed collage formed from a wide variety of materials arranged and pasted on a cardboard support. A distinctive feature of Ayón's collographs is their seductive surfaces, creating complex textures and overlapping images, densely saturated with shades and tones. Indeed, the tactile nature of her compositions and their richly worked surfaces make them visibly works of craft as well as works of art. This artist achieved her distinctive formal effects by utilising papers of different thickness to gain varying degrees of colour intensity and by using emery and carborundum to achieve the intense blacks. The whites were derived from very smooth fine chrome cardboard, gesso and varnish, whilst she used acrylic for the various shades of grey. She also employed the technique of intaglio to bevel the collographs and to achieve the black lines that outlined her figures.

Her very specific formal approach serves to counterbalance the monumentality of her works. Although large in format, they include many intricate, delicate and overlaid

patterns, where the aesthetic appeal is worked out through the tiniest details. Furthermore, the colours Ayón used in her compositions create striking effects that help to transmit the strength and impenetrability of the society whilst providing a mysterious and solemn atmosphere to her work. Aside from the multiple visual possibilities inherent in her chosen artistic format, the effects and results of her engravings harmonise in a certain manner with the esoteric and mysterious nature of the subject matter. Therefore her *oeuvre* emanates more than just formal and aesthetic appeal.

In keeping with her use of syncretic imagery and the connections between *Abakuá* and Christianity, the colours Ayón used function in terms of Christian colour symbolism. In this reading the colour white represents innocence, purity, faith and glory among other things, as opposed to the colour black, which is associated with penance and death. For example, in Figure.26, the two portrayals of Sikán and the goat within the collograph differ in colour and texture. In the main image, Sikán has a fish scale cap and a white upper torso covered with scales. Inside the circular medallion image, Sikán is rendered in flat black with a halo and small cross attached to her wrist, whilst the goat is white. The different textures, patterns and colours between the upper and lower sections of Sikán's body in the main image complement one another, as do those between Sikán's white scaled upper torso and the more irregular grey mottled shades of the goat thrown over her shoulder.

In addition, Ayón's utilisation of the spatial visual devices of the medallion form and the *mise en Abîme* (*an image within an image*) in works such as Figures.23&26 function in specific ways. Medallion images are a recognised Christian visual iconographical device associated with icons, as icons were often placed in the form of medallions. By creating

mise en Abîmes within the medallion form, Ayón self-consciously took advantage of the specific formal and iconographic potential of Russian Christian Byzantine icons to portray her own reinterpreted concepts. Her use of such icons demonstrates how she incorporated any experience or source that she deemed relevant into her collographs. This is also evident in the intricate patterned circular design she often incorporated in her compositions, as in the palm of Sikán in Figure.20 and on the palm and torso of the *Abakuá* figure in Figure.23. This is most probably a sign Ayón invented, as it does not appear to derive from *Abakuá* or Christian traditions.

Ayón had particularly liked Russian Byzantine icons since her student days when she studied them from art books and realised that they were perfectly comparable with the imagery of *Abakuá.*[319] Her knowledge about this particular type of icon images could also have stemmed from her formal education training in the 1970s and the themes she was exposed to, as that decade was a particularly Soviet influenced period in Cuba. Ayón's compositions reflect some typical features associated with Russian Byzantine icons; prominent wide staring eyes as representative of divinity, sharply marked shading and linear effects, flat compositions, large heads, round faces and halos. Ayón also drew upon the hieratic qualities found in Byzantine icons by placing her figures in seemingly austere and symmetrical frontal positions with pronounced oval eyes. These details produce the same effects that they had done in antiquity – venerability and mediation – and they help to imbue Ayón's compositions with a mystical type of religious aura that suggests, even to a layperson, that the subjects have spiritual significance.

[319] Mateo quoting Belkis Ayón. "A mi me gustaban mucho los íconos bizantinos rusos. Me pasaba una buena cantidad de tiempo contemplándolos en los libros de arte, hasta que un día descubrí que eran perfectamente equiparables con toda la imaginería Abakuá.

Figure.26 demonstrates formal connections with Byzantine forms, with the static pose of Sikán and the goat in the medallion reminiscent of the devotional images of the Virgin Mary with the infant Christ found in Russian Byzantine icons.[320] The inclusion of the Christian halo motif within the medallion form provides further evidence that Ayón wanted to suggest the divine status of Sikán as analogous to the Virgin Mary. There are also striking aesthetic similarities between Ayón's compositions in general and the visual effects formed by Russian Byzantine mosaic designs, in terms of their textured effects and intricate geometric, circular and foliage patterns. And as with the icons, mosaic was a traditional formal technique used for the apse and wall decoration in Byzantine churches.

A consistent feature in Ayón's corpus is silhouetted figures without mouths, which reasserts in a formal manner the idea of silence and secrecy surrounding the *Abakuá* society. The artist effectively utilised the suppression of a meaningful sign, in the guise of the absence of mouths, to denote ideas of secrecy and silence. By so doing Ayón may have sought to reassert that the *Abakuá* society is an esoteric one and is still illegal in Cuba. However, there could also be another dimension in terms of the ideas of silence and secrecy, as evident in *Mi alma y yo te queremos* (*My soul and I both love you*) (1993) **[Fig.27]**.

This composition depicts a man crouched down in front of a fish with some feathered projections visible directly behind him. Behind the figure a huge dark shadow looms with white eyes visible and seven feathered emanations located in a circular formation at the apex of the dark mass. The ominous shadow form resembles a mountain and this dark

[320] Images of Mary illustrating her roles of protection and intercession were particularly common in Russian Byzantine art.

mass is engraved with many intricate designs, including geometric grid-like patterns, circles and crosses, as discussed in reference to Figure.23. Ayón stated that Figure.27 referred to the fish placed in front of the man that radiates a shadow behind him that could be a spirit or a mountain. In that dark shadow is the crouching man's soul, full of signatures and symbols to mark the presence of the seven ancestors, signified by the seven feathers atop the dark mass.[321]

The seven plumes Ayón depicted represent the seven major plazas and the seven spirits of the ancestor-founders of the *Abakuá* society: Mokongo, Iyamba, Isue, Isuenekue, Empego, Ekuenon and Enkrikamo. In *Abakuá* symbolism, feather iconography connotes silence and has been strongly associated with women and the society.[322] Feathers also decorate the silent *Abakuá Sese* drum and, as with the ancestors and the plumes, the notions of silence and nobility are very important in that context too. Thus the feathers in Figure.27 could allude to the silent female dimension that is an integral part of the foundations of the *Abakuá* society, as well as the general silence surrounding the society.

The artist's utilisation of iconographical elements relating to secrecy and silence may also refer to the marginalisation and suppression of the society, which has continued into the revolutionary era, in keeping with its chequered socio-political history in Cuba since

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[321] Handwritten note by Ayón. "Aquí esta el hombre frente al pez de el irrada su sombra ¿espíritu, monte? Allí esta su alma toda lleno de firmas y símbolos, es la presencia de los antepasados con los siete muñones (plumeros) en su cabeza".

[322] Robert Farris Thompson, *Flash of the Spirit*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1983), 236. The underlying importance of women has always been a factor associated with the rituals involved in this secret all-male fraternity, in both the African and Cuban contexts. In West Africa, *Nnimm* was considered to be the female dimension to *Ngbe*. Part of the *Ngbe* ceremonial was to honour the mother of the sounding leopard — the *Nnimm* woman, Ebongo. The Ejagham believed that *Nnimm* women were privy to ancient secrets first given by, or seized from, beings in the river or sea. However, the prestigious female *Nnimm* society did not reemerge in Cuba. In the Cuban context, Ebongo was replaced by the female figure, Sikán whom Afro-Cubans presume belonged to a powerful matriarchal society that knew the ancient secrets of *Ngbe* before men did.

the nineteenth century. Moreover, from a personal perspective, the absence of mouths in these compositions could also refer to the artist's feelings of unhappiness, frustration and hopelessness and the silence that she maintained in relation to that. Indeed, the multi-layered formal and iconographical traits of Ayón's works in combination with the connotations attached to the *Abakuá* society could be analogous to her feelings about her societal marginalisation as an Afro-Cuban female. The artist's father is one of Castro's bodyguards and her family has enjoyed an intimate association with the regime, which may have inadvertently placed extra ideological pressures on Ayón and affected how she chose to comment though her art production.

In addition, I offer the speculative possibility that the recurring theme of silence and secrecy in her work could have implications that extend beyond the considerations already mentioned. There may be more overt political reference that can be read into Ayón's focus on *Abakuá* themes and the bodily traces present in her work, which relate to the revolutionary regime and issues of governmental control. Her iconography could allude to the lack of freedom of speech within the Cuban context for ordinary Cubans. One must remember that in a communist country like Cuba the opportunities for freedom of expression outside of one's private or domestic sphere can, and often have been, limited. Therefore, it is feasible that Ayón may have felt judged and watched in a social and political sense within her society by official sources as well as by *Abakuá* members. This is further substantiated by Ayón's visual emphasis on depicting random eyes set against contrasting backgrounds as a bodily trace in some of her compositions, which connote the ideas of watching and being watched and begs the question; who is being watched, by whom and why?

I believe it is fair to state that Ayón's use of various visual/textual devices and syncretic religious iconography help her achieve a sense of elusiveness and mysteriousness in her work that is a trait intimately associated with the *Abakuá* society itself. Her highly encoded compositions, her original iconography and her use of specific formal techniques create a rich visual discourse with very complex literal and metaphorical layers.

Word and Image

The lack of written titles in the majority of Belkis Ayón's work can be viewed as textually reinforcing the notions of silence and secrecy associated with the *Abakuá* society, in addition to the formal techniques the artist used to suggest this. The lack of semantic elements to assign meaning also adds to the sense of mysteriousness surrounding her choice of subject matter. However, for a few compositions she did include written titles that are revealing in relation to the iconography and ideas she presented.

The title of *Arrepentida* (*Repentant*) (1993) (Figure.20) implies the notion of regret for past sins or actions and is a term associated with Christian religious practices and themes. The combination of the title along with the scaled skin, the cross form, the spherical pattern and the necklaces within the image create iconographical and ideological connections between Christian and *Abakuá* religious traditions. Similarly, there are Christian connotations associated with the terms *Perfidia, Resurección* and *Desobendencia* (*Perfidy, Resurrection, Disobedience*) (1999) **[Fig.28]**, which are the titles of a triptych by Ayón. The titles for these three works can be read in conjunction with their visual iconographies to suggest analogies between Christian and *Abakuá*

practices, as well as connections between Christ and Sikán's betrayals, sacrifices and subsequent resurrections.

Aside from the titles within the space of the compositions, Ayón utilised *anaforuana* signs, as well as curved and linear shapes and signs projected onto figures and objects and as dense, swirling backgrounds. By so doing, she created visual effects that, for her, were conducive to working with a very strange visual information. *Anaforuanas*, the multi-various written signs and codes of the *Abakuá* society, evoke meaning in her work by presenting a referential and an expressive level for reading and they heighten the semiotic charge of her engravings. In Figure.22, the two figures of Sikán have a plethora of *anaforuana* signs etched over their bodies, including a common motif utilised by Ayón: the quartered circle symbol. This symbol, depicted on one figure's forehead and over the top of the other figure's head, has a great deal of significance to the religious traditions of the society. It has been incorporated and adapted into many other *signos* (*signs*), *gandos* (*sacred signs made on the floor of the temple*) and *firmas* (*signatures*). It represents mystic vision and symbolises the eyes of Tanze and Sikán and the fusion of their power as the deepest force of *Abakuá*. Ayón's positioning of this sign in relation to the head in this piece gives it visual prominence within the composition, whilst the combination of this particular sign and the head also connote the sign's importance.

Ayón used specific *anaforuanas* on the upper and lower torso of the figure emerging from the river in this collograph, which Sosa included in *Los Ñañigos* under the section of *firmas* that represent Sikáneka, or Sikán **[Fig.29]** (see the first two *firmas* on the top line). By utilising these signs on this figure the artist makes a powerful and authentic

connection to Sikán, and on Sikán's sacrifice and fundamental role in the founding of the *Abakuá* society and its ritual practices.

Visual Narratives

Belkis Ayón's use of narrative in her compositions helps to restore the reality of the *Abakuá* myths to a historical time span. But in another sense, her mythic images can also be categorised as signifiers of a timeless, natural order that connect the viewer to the past, present and future. She depicts eschatological time — religious, ritual and divine time — and cyclical time, as each ceremony (past, present and future) has always involved a call to Sikán.

The narrative in Figure.22 is concerned with the divine origins of the society, where the artist uses a continuous narrative mode to tell the story of the *Abakuá* origins and to represent the temporal-spatial world of the religion and its events. This particular narrative mode refers to the depiction of successive events within framed units of the composition to produce a synopsis of particular events,[323] in this case in relation to the society's protagonist, Sikán.

Moreover, there is a form of dialogism present in this work that creates sequences and meaning. This dialogism occurs through chronotopes. Chronotopes have significance in relation to the narrative structures Ayón uses in her compositions, as chronotopes are organising centres for the fundamental narrative events of the *Abakuá* myth in relation to its female protagonist. For instance, the artist's use of the continuous narrative form in

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[323]See Vidya Dehejia's adaptation of Kurt Weitzmann's narrative classifications for her research in *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art — Visual Narratives of India*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997), 15.

Figure.22 helps to focus the viewer's attention on the *Abakuá* origin myth as a sequence of events, by using multiple images of Sikán within one composition. This visual consistency also serves to connect the past, present and future in relation to the religious society. The two images of Sikán are the loci of the narrative and the story is told through their distribution, iconography and the relationship between the figures.

One figure stands in the centre of the composition in a river facing out toward the viewer, with winged spirits surrounding her to warn her of what is to happen: her sacrifice and the subsequent resurrection of her spirit.[324] There is a cross sign placed on her forehead and a vertical line emanating from the top of her head, with the faint outline of a human head and body floating above her to visually connote her death and her spirit departing from her body. The other Sikán figure emerges from the river with her hands placed behind her back to suggest her submission and compliance. A cross sign is located in the centre of one of her palms, and she is covered with *anaforuana* symbols to indicate her founding role in the *Abakuá* religion after her death and resurrection. The presentation of dual aspects of Sikán's character could be read as representing both the sacrificial victim and the all-powerful feminine presence, which reinforce her pivotal place at the very heart of the *Abakuá* society and the ambiguousness surrounding her too.

There are various chronotopic dimensions at work in this composition: the chronotopes of threshold, biographical time and epic and drama. The chronotope of the threshold and its concern with crisis and break in a life is relevant. The portrayal of key moments in Sikán's life with regard to her sacrifice and resurrection represent such a crisis and a

[324]Handwritten note by Belkis Ayón. "Sikán está entrando al río, los espíritus le avisan de lo que va suceder, la muerte, nuevamente la resurreccion sale del río su espíritu iniciado la religion, con todas sus firmas, sus derechos".

break. The chronotope of biographical time, which weaves historical and socio-public events together with the personal,[325] is another chronotope very applicable to Sikán's life trajectory and the founding of the society. Furthermore, the chronotope of epic and drama also has relevance to this work, as Ayón had an artistic and theoretical interest in the genesis of the *Abakuá* religion and this chronotope is concerned with folk-mythological time in which ancient historical time begins to come into its own.[326]

The chronotopes of epic drama and of biographical time are also present in Figure.23. In the narrative structure of this collograph, Ayón carefully adhered to the locations where particular events occurred, which were then transformed into specific places. She employed key fundamental iconographic elements associated with the society's mythological origins, such as the hill, palm tree, river, goat and *anaforuanas.* The narrative mode is sequential, which is similar to continuous narrative except that in a sequential narrative mode scenes are separated from one another by a variety of compositional means. The particular visual device that the artist employed in this instance was a centrally placed *mise en Abîme* in a medallion form, to present each scene as a separate unit within the collograph.[327] In formal terms, the medallion and its iconography place visual emphasis on these elements as the symbolic site of the unification and establishment of the *Abakuá* religion. A Sikán figure is located in the medallion and another is overlaid on top of many intricate patterns and signs in the centre of the main composition, to visually denote her importance at the heart of the society.

[325] Bakhtin, 248–249.
[326] Ibid., 104.
[327] Dehejia, 20.

La sentencia (Figure.21) and *Sin titulo (Untitled)* (1993) **[Fig.30]** also display the chronotope of the threshold. Both of these collographs centre on Sikán's sacrifice and her martyred status in static monoscenic narrative modes that temporally seal off the sequence of Sikán's individual life, linking to the idea of the severing of her life from the social whole. Outside of, but related to this event, there is an historical time sequence that serves as the channel for the life of the *Abakuá* society.[328]

Figure.30 includes a white dove, a fish-scaled Sikán and a male figure called Nasakó, the mythological *Abakuá* priest who ordered Sikán's sacrifice. According to the artist, the white dove represents the Holy Spirit begging for mercy on Sikán's behalf, in line with the traditional Christian interpretation of the dove as the symbol of the Holy Spirit and purity.[329] The iconography of all the characters in this work relate to the society's origin myth. However, in contrast to the white dove and the white-scaled figure of Sikán, Nasakó's body is highly patterned. He wears a loincloth and cap with leopard print on them - overt symbols associated with the male leopard society. Furthermore, the body positioning of both human characters creates a visual narrative about Sikán's inevitable sacrifice. Nasakó stands with his arms crossed in an unyielding frontal position, whereas Sikán's position is very submissive and she looks up at Nasakó, suggesting the unequal balance of power in their relationship.

Other collographs highlight various chronotopes at work and can be read as expressive of specific characteristics the artist associated with Sikán. *Perfidia*, *Resurección* and *Desobendencia* (Figure.28) are concerned with ideas of revenge and reconciliation.

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[328] Bakhtin, 216–217.
[329] Handwritten note by Belkis Ayón. "Sikán esta a un lado con su piel de pez y el espiritu santo pidiendo clemenza".

Within these three engravings the chronotopes previously discussed — threshold, biographical time and epic and drama — are all present. Ayón used the active monoscenic narrative mode as a reference to the narratives in all three works to portray a series of actions from the myth of origin: Sikán's betrayal, sacrifice and her subsequent resurrection for the society.

In relation to *Perfidia*, Orlando Hernandez has suggested that through the presence of the female in this work, Ayón sought to invite forgiveness for Sikán's betrayal or treason, and so tried to restore lost ancestral privileges to women, at least on some imaginary level.[330] Whilst I agree with this, I believe there are further layers of meaning that can be read in this work, which concern its written title and complex iconography. The meaning of the word perfidy is 'deceitful breach of faith' or 'betrayal of trust', but in visual terms Ayón does not direct the meaning of perfidy toward Sikán in this collograph. Instead, this piece may suggest an interesting role reversal in which Sikán forgives the *Abakuá* society for her sacrifice, not the other way around. In this reading, Sikán's power within the society is emphasised and the idea of the act of treason committed against her is textually implied in the title. Furthermore, there are ideological analogies that can be drawn between Christ and Sikán, as well as the connections through word/image associations in *Perfidia*.

An iconic dialogue is manifest in this composition through exchanged gazes and gestures, emotional expressions and the orientation of bodily positions between the figures.[331] Sikán's open, frontal body positioning and her hand gesture, reaching out in a

[330] Hernández.
[331] Louis Marin, "Towards a Theory of Reading in the Visual Arts: Poussin's The Arcadian Shepherds," *Calligram: Essays in New Art History from France*, ed. Norman Bryson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 77.

manner of reconciliation and friendship, denote her forgiveness and acceptance. The iconography of her scaled body and the fish she holds behind her back, connote the mythological origins of the society and Sikán's central role in its inception and continuance. Sikán's hand gesture effectively hides the fish from the *Abakuá* members present, alluding to the hidden powers of the religion, a religion that would not exist without her.

The darkened *Abakuá* male members in this collograph are depicted in various guises; turning their backs on Sikán not willing to forgive her; kneeling down and offering out hands in reconciliation; supplicate, presenting a sacrificial rooster to Sikán. In turn, Sikán holds out her open palm to receive the offering and the conciliatory gestures. According to *Abakuá* literature, roosters form an important part of all *Abakuá* ceremonies, and thus the rooster in this image can be read as a ritual offering being presented to Sikán. By depicting the ritual act of offering and the rooster, Ayón invested *Perfidia* with the charge and authority of an official *Abakuá* ceremony.

There are a number of different *anaforuanas* visible in this image, which add to the authenticity of this piece in terms of the ritual practices that are involved in *Abakuá* ceremonies and traditions. For instance, the kneeling figure offering the rooster to Sikán on the far right of the composition has a sign depicted on his back, which includes feather-like emanations emerging from the top. A similar type of *anaforuanas* can be found in Sosa's book **[Fig.31]** under the heading "Nasakó *firmas*" (see the first *firma* on the second line, this bears a striking resemblance the one Ayón uses in *Perfidia*).

Nasakó was responsible for Sikán's sacrifice according to the myths of the society. So, by utilising this *anaforuana*, which is one of Nasakó's signatures, Ayón clearly identifies this figure as Nasakó and she depicts him in supplicate position holding out a rooster as an offering to Sikán as if to try to make amends for his previous actions. The meaning of perfidy in this collograph is directed toward Nasakó and the *Abakuá* society, rather than at Sikán. The artist sought through various textual means to suggest that it was Sikán who had to be appeased for the treason originally committed against her (i.e. her sacrifice in order or the society to be founded).

Additionally, other *anaforuanas* visible in *Perfidia* include the quartered circle, which is seen on the back of the neck of the figure knelt down directly in front of Sikán, as well as another *anaforuana* incorporating the quartered circle held out in this figure's hand [Figure.28 *Perfidia* detail]. This sign is very similar to one of Anamangüí's *firmas*, who is an indispensable íreme associated with the society's funeral rites and mourning (*llantos or nlloró*) process **[Fig.32]** (see middle *firma* on the second line). Anamangüí is a spirit that comes from the forest[332] and the *guardian-responsable* (*guardian officer*) of the corpses and "*el muerto que lleva el muerto*"(*the dead that carries the dead*).[333]

Through the portrayal of a *firma* associated with Anamangüí, Ayón may have been making reference to Sikán's death and to signify the mourning for her loss. The visual narrative reinforces this by the inclusion of another female image located next to the white-scaled body of Sikán that could represent the deceased spirit of Sikán — a figure barely visible with a grey body and black head. This form is turned toward the white

[332] Lydia Cabrera, *La Lengua Sagrada de los Ñañigos*, (Miami: Colección del Chicherekú en el Exilo, 1988), 52. "Esta plaza no se jura. Es un espíritu que viene del monte".
[333] Sosa, 169.

Sikán, with her arm outstretched behind Sikán's back. The Anamangüí figure reaches up between these two female figures and his body position in relation to theirs and his action of submissive offering lend weight to this interpretation of the work, in conjunction with the meanings of the *anaforuanas*.

Desobendencia (Figure.28b) also concentrates on the idea of Sikán as the sacrificed victim. As in *Perfidia*, there are two Sikán figures situated next to one another in this piece. One figure is white but not scaled and covered with black line markings similar to those that are marked onto the bodies of *Abakuá* neophytes, *rayados* (*markings*), as part of the initiation process **[Fig.33]**. Overlapping the white figure is a grey, scaled Sikán, head in hand, eyes looking toward the white Sikán and with a cross sign placed on her forehead. The grey version of Sikán also has black marks visible on the backs of her palms, which may suggest the stigmata comparisons with Christ and his sacrifice.

The contrast between the iconography and colour symbolism of these two figures visually connotes Sikán's dual status. The grey Sikán represents her sacrificial death and martyrdom. The figure's body position and gestures along with her scaled body form, the grey and black tones and the cross sign and stigmata all work together to suggest Sikán's perceived disobedience in betraying the society's secrets and her punishment: sacrifice and martyrdom. By contrast, the white figure represents the transformative process Sikán underwent from punishment and sacrificial victim to becoming the means by which the sacred voice might be heard. Hence, her founding place in the society's origins and her role as a powerful and necessary force within it.

The white Sikán's specific black line markings suggest parallels between her situation and the rituals and processes *Abakuá* initiates have to undergo in order to become part of the brotherhood. The gestures and body position of the white Sikán indicate that she is pondering her situation and exclusion from the society from her placement at the edge of the collograph, sidelined in a defensive bodily position with her arms crossed. Meanwhile the rituals and traditions of the society continue to be played out in the remainder of the composition, with bodies overlaid one another and spread throughout. In a similar process, the initiates are placed in a liminal space during their initiation not quite part of the society yet but not part of the outside world either.

A kneeling figure in the top right hand corner of *Desobendencia* could also be Sikán but it is not entirely clear. The body is covered in the familiar circular patterns that Ayón consistently used in her compositions, which do not seem to be *anaforuanas*. Instead, they could be signs that the artist invented and which had some personal meaning or resonance for her. However, there are underlying and overt references to Sikán in the iconography of this figure and to Christian themes. The kneeling character holds a container that could be a representation of Sikán's original calabash, a *Vasija de Sikán* (*Sikán's vessel*) [Figure.28b detail]. This connection is indicated through the use of three female images on it, which are stylistically reminiscent of previous images of Sikán that Ayón created (Figures.23/26). The image on the far left of the 'calabash' depicts the Virgin Mary holding a goat, with linear halo and a small cross on her wrist. In the centre image, Sikán is portrayed with her back to the viewer and a goat thrown over her shoulder. The right hand image also appears to be based on a traditional Christian stylistic interpretation of the Virgin Mary, shown with halo and in a similar static frontal-facing pose as the left side image.

The spherical pattern on the forehead of the kneeling figure is similar to the *Sol-calavera* (*Sun-skull*), which forms part of the top section of an *Altar de Nyéguéye* **[Fig.34]**.[334] As Sosa stated, this type of altar was used for funeral ceremonies, and the placement and inclusion of this pattern on the kneeling figure, along with the *Vasija de Sikán* suggest a link to Sikán and her death. Moreover, the predominant use of grey and black on this kneeling figure connote an association with death in terms of Christian colour symbolism as well as the analogies and connections the artist's makes between the Virgin Mary and Sikán.

In *Resurección* (Figure.28a), as the central figure Sikán is portrayed as a purely white form and no longer lined. The colour symbolism, body gestures and positioning of this figure within the composition present her as a powerful figure at the heart of the society. They suggest confidence and renewal and she bursts forth from behind and above the black and grey *Abakuá* members, with her arms spread wide to formally indicate her resurrected state and centrality to the society. A small section of one of her upheld hands is depicted in black to reiterate her resurrected status [detail I]. As with *Perfidia* and *Desobendencia*, there seems to be a curved female form, another version of Sikán, visible on the left-hand side of the composition, emerging from behind a curtain or veil. This figure has a black face and mottled designs etched over the entire body, which consist of an uneven patchwork of grey and black sections.

This particular stylistic trait was used by the artist in previous works, such as the goat image in Figure.26. This may suggest that through such imagery and colour symbolism

[334] Ibid. Sosa states that this particular type of altar form dating from 1927 was for funeral ceremonies — "*para ceremonia fúnebre*". In this altar image, the *Sol-calavera* is listed as situated immediately below the *Vasija de Sikán* and the representation of Tanze the fish in the very top section of the altar.

the artist sought to designate Sikán and the goat's status as equal as both were/are ritual victims and sacrificed. Furthermore, the gesture and body positioning of the emerging figure in Figure.28a connote the idea of someone reticently stepping of the shadows, coming out from some sort of seclusion. Simultaneously, on the opposite side of the composition, another figure, which may also be Sikán, tentatively emerges from behind another veil of some kind, the figure's body densely etched with swirls, lines and other patterns. The tip of one of the hands is completely white, as a counterbalance and point of connection between this figure and the central white figure, who has a partially black hand to complement the other figure's white one [detail II].

Formally, all three of these female characters interconnect through their body positioning, gestures and colour symbolism, and their iconography and the visual narrative between them sets out the history of the society. In addition to the interplay between the characters in this composition, there are a profusion of intricate patterns etched and overlaid throughout, as well as iconographical motifs associated with the society. These include a variety of plant forms, reeds and leaves, like those found in Figure.22, to make reference to the river that formed such an integral part of the mythological origins of the society. A single fish is surrounded by these plant forms at the centre bottom of *Resurección*, situated directly beneath a bent over black figure, with a large quartered white and grey circle covering its skull [detail III].

A dialogic relationship is established between the narratives in the three compositions that refer to the importance of Sikán as a central figure in the society. The initial sacrifice of Sikán directly led to the founding of the society and all of its traditions and practices, and even after death, the resurrection of Sikán's soul or life force became

fundamental to the society's survival and her presence is still actively required for every ceremony. When viewed together these three works highlight the double nature of all primitive divinities and the blending of beneficent and maleficent attributes that constitute the two faces of the sacred.[335] As the surrogate-victim Sikán was defined as maleficent violence within the community, or the 'bad' sacred, but was metamorphosed by death into beneficent violence, or the 'good' sacred.[336] In her beneficent aspect, Sikán elicits public veneration and can assume both roles simultaneously, or in succession.[337]

These three collographs highlight the duality of Sikán as goddess and victim, to be revered and sacrificed. In the same way, women have been banned from the society and yet a woman lies at its very foundations. Ayón's artistic corpus can be read as attempts to resemanticise the myths of the *Abakuá* society through her reinterpreted narratives based on the female character at its centre. For Cuban art historian, David Maceo, Ayón's recontextualisation of the *Abakuá* myths could have an approximate parallel to the two categories that Northrop Frye considered: myth and compromise. Although Frye did not formulate these concepts specifically for the visual arts, nevertheless, Maceo suggests that Ayón's engravings could demonstrate how art can be viewed as a sort of laboratory where myths are freely reworked and created, thus producing new compromised myths.[338] By returning to the origin of the myths, Ayón narrated and reinvented the *Abakuá* myths in her own unique iconography. The new myths she created sought to amend the past and modify the future. The original myths thus gain in complexity and take on new dimensions.

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[335] Girard, 257.
[336] Ibid., 258.
[337] Ibid., 250.
[338] Mateo.

There are potential social, cultural and ideological implications that have relevance to Ayón's self-perception in terms of her choice of subject matter, the visual and textual devices she employed and the subjectivity present in her images. Her artistic process was concerned with constructing a counter-view of Cuban society from a feminine perspective. She carried out serious research and selected specific mythological events from her own analytical viewpoint with the purpose of extending those experiences to other comparative manifestations of human behaviour that related to her personal existence. For Ayón, the mystery and historical secrecy surrounding the legend was precisely what gave her the opportunity to make certain speculations.[339] Thus her work explores the place of women within the sacred realms of power and secrecy in the brotherhood, but her compositions also suggest a parallel with everyday reality.[340] As such her works of art can become sites for an active negotiation of her status and position in Cuban society. This raises questions about how Ayón perceived social, religious and genders boundaries in her country, and her artistic and societal positioning to comment on such things.

By the 1990s she was one of relatively few women artists and the only Afro-Cuban one who was placed in a leading role in the art world in Cuba. She was also an influential professor at the ISA and a high official at UNEAC. Bearing these points in mind, combined with her personal life situation in terms of gender, social and race issues, it is feasible that she felt a responsibility to use her artistic position to comment on specific marginalised elements within Cuban society. She may have sought to make reference

[339] Handwritten note by Belkis Ayón. "El propio misterio de la leyenda, lo encubierto que han estado algunos de sus significados en el devenir histórico es lo que me ha dado precisamente la oportunidad para hacer determinadas especulaciones".

[340] Marilyn A Zeitlin, "Luz Brillante," *Contemporary Art from Cuba: Irony and Survival on the Utopian Island*) (Arizona: Arizona State University, 1998: 8, accessed 2 November 1999) [catalogue on-line] ; available from http://asuma.fa.asu.edu/cuba/essay.html ; Internet.

to the multi-layered social, religious and cultural reality of Cuban life via her representation of the *Abakuá* society. Perhaps she felt a personal connection to the society in terms of their shared African derivation, as well as their shared societal marginalisation. Furthermore, the *Abakuá* society may have provided Ayón with a pertinent example of the patriarchal and *machista* values still prevalent in Cuba and many other societies. Hence, the *Abakuá* society was a good choice for her to produce works that she stated were her personal and spiritual testimony.

Above all else, this artist aspired to present her own vision from her perspective as an observer of the religion, and, as an observer of the contemporary socio-cultural, gender, racial, and political situation in Cuba. As an Afro-Cuban female artist, Ayón was placed professionally on the margins but she was also placed in the very centre of the Cuban contemporary art scene and was respected as such. Through her artistic endeavours she violated borders between the sexes, between what is mythical and what is sociological and between temporal, religious and artistic spaces.[341] In a sense, Ayón depicted marginalised elements from a position of marginality, as an Afro-Cuban female, albeit a successful, professional artist. Her sense of marginality as an Afro-Cuban female artist could also be attributed to working within a discipline that has traditionally been known to be very patriarchal, as well as utilising a subject that is strongly associated with men. In Ayón's horizon, through the trace of her own bodily image, perhaps Sikán became the name for women in all societies.

[341] Valdés Figueroa.

Alternatively, Ayón may have chosen to use the *Abakuá* society as a suitable metonym to identify and locate Cuban culture and society as a whole? Perhaps she wanted to allude to the underlying strength and impenetrability of Cuba as a culture despite the many social, political and economic problems the country and its nation have faced? Feasibly, Ayón may have connected the marginality associated with the *Abakuá* society to her own situation within Cuba from a social and political perspective, and the position of Cuba as a nation and its marginality within an international framework? Or, in line with the multi-layered formal and iconographical methods she utilised, Ayón may have alluded to all of the above-mentioned concerns in her unique and highly complex collographs.

Magdalena Campos-Pons

María Magdalena Campos-Pons has utilised her body in her art production in a plurality of styles and media: cut out figures, photographs, specific objects and themes associated with women, video and live performance, and has sometimes incorporated her own body in her artistic processes. Like Pérez, she has approached the use of the body in a ritualistic sense, although for Pérez this has been a way to consider universal human concerns. Pérez's interest in ritual, myth and religion has stemmed from a generic concern with her work referring in general to the fragility of humans and the precocity of existence. Whereas Campos-Pons' interest in these themes stemmed initially from the connections she made between religious rituals and art performance, and she converted her body into ritual spaces in the process.

Campos-Pons' representation of her body has been intimately bound up with issues of gender, race, marginality and identity for her as an Afro-Cuban female artist. Yet as an Afro-Cuban artist there has been the simplistic assumption that she must work with Afro-Cuban themes, but it was not until she left Cuba in 1990 that these themes began to appear in her work. In her earlier creations, she aestheticised and explored the concepts of procreation, female sexuality and eroticism to highlight the contradictions inherent in the sexual and racial politics of contemporary Cuban society.[342] Her artistic interest in these issues, as well as with gender inequality and *machismo*, began with *Cinturón de castidad* (*Chastity belt*) (1985) as part of her ISA studies, and *Anticonceptivo* (*Contraceptive*) (1987) [Figs.35/36].

In these pieces she makes formal reference to African objects, in the guise of spears and shields: phallic objects to represent maleness, *machismo* and as bearers of sexual significance. These pieces also explore how the woman's body has been used as a device for control, implying the *machista* bent of Cuban society. She described *Cinturón de castidad* as "based on the idea of the oppression of feminine sexuality".[343] *Anticonceptivo* continued in this vein, based on the space and violation of the female body through contraception by the depiction of a giant IUD, an intra uterine contraceptive device.

At a metaphorical level, these works reflected Campos-Pons' concern with under age abortion and abortion in general, as a method of contraception practised by some Cuban women. The artist likened the alien metal IUD object to a modern day chastity belt,

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[342]Charles Merewether, "Light me another Cuba. Late Modernism after the Revolution," Catalogue (*Made in Havana: Contemporary Art from Cuba*), (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1988), 10.
[343] Magdalena Campos-Pons, letter to Luis Camnitzer, 22 December 1990, see *New Art from Cuba,* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1994), 213.

arguing it was the woman's body and space that was violated in the process of contraception. The object is inserted into the woman's body, reinforcing the idea that it is the woman's role to take care of reproduction issues and responsibilities.[344]

Her art production has often dealt with controversial subjects and she described herself in the 1980s as not just an artist, but an activist too.[345] Furthermore, Campos-Pons is a strong-willed, opinionated person, who has always wanted to speak her mind and be heard and, as she has commented, "in Cuba you can get into trouble for that".[346] She encountered some prejudice about her early choice of subject matter, with some male colleagues suggesting that her work could be really good if she did not concentrate on women's issues.[347] This illustrates some of the underlying *machista* attitudes entrenched within Cuban society and art world. Another indication of Cuban racial and gender prejudices is demonstrated by the artist's refusal to straighten her hair as an adolescent in order to be viewed as more attractive by Cuban men. This highlights Campos-Pons' personal strength of character and helps to explain her artistic stance on gender and racial issues as well as Cuban societal perceptions of female beauty in relation to these topics. The implication is that Afro hair is considered less sexually and socially desirable — evidence of the 'whitening' process in Cuba.

Campos-Pons' early work was also concerned with trying to understand the meaning of *mestizo* and what 'being Cuban' meant for her, as an amalgam of Latin, Spanish and African cultures.[348] She drew upon indigenous Latin American elements in this

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[344] Magdalena Campos-Pons, interview by author, tape recording, Cambridge MA, 14 October 1999.
[345] Magdalena Campos-Pons, interview by author, tape recording, Jamaica Plain MA, 12 December 1999.
[346] Ibid.
[347] Ibid.
[348] Ibid.

endeavour, but not Afro-Cuban elements, even though some of her 1980s peers like Marta María Pérez, José Bedia and Juan Francisco Elso Padilla were incorporating Afro-Cuban iconographical elements into their work at that time. However, Campos-Pons felt she wanted to respect the Afro-Cuban religious traditions she had grown up with, as an integral part of her heritage, but issues of gender and societal marginalisation concerned her more artistically at that stage. These linked in with her identity concerns as a black Cuban female.[349]

During the early–mid 1980s the artist felt a tremendous sense of responsibility as the only female Afro-Cuban artist at the elite ISA institution, but she also felt a sense of isolation too. The only other female artists at the ISA at that time were Marta María Pérez and Consuelo Castañeda, neither of which is Afro-Cuban. Although Campos-Pons did feel some affiliation with Pérez, as both were interested in gender issues, they approached this subject in very different ways and from differing worldviews. Campos-Pons was a single, Afro-Cuban female, whilst Pérez was a white married woman with twins, though both derived from popular backgrounds.[350]

In keeping with the type of person she is, Campos-Pons has always believed she has the potential to make a difference and she has sought to communicate with people via her art. As part of an intellectual elite within Cuban society, her aspirations to want to make some difference or to enact changes in an ideological sense fits in with Mariátegui's notion of the role of avant-garde artists in society. The desire to want to mediate and discuss certain issues was very evident in her early pieces when she

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[349] Campos-Pons interview, October 1999.

[350] Ibid.

questioned her own identity as well as *machista* attitudes in Cuban society. She continued in this vein by approaching the taboo topics of race and homophobia in the late 1980s.

In 1989 she exhibited with fellow young 1980s artists in a powerful cycle of exhibitions (some of which were censored) held at the Castillo de la Real Fuerza in Old Havana. The artistic atmosphere in which this exhibition took place reflected the turbulent times, when Cuban artists began to produce vivid, critical accounts of themes previously "held sacred under the revolutionary banner".[351] The main theme Campos-Pons addressed in her installation was race in the Cuban context. *Hablando de árboles, cedro negro, cedro blanco, especie endémica* (*Speaking of trees, black cedar, white cedar, endemic species*) consisted of phallic wooden shapes similar to spears, which she used to make an analogy between types of trees found in Cuba in relation to the types of people found there.

By exploring this issue her aim was to put out a social commentary to confront prejudiced attitudes in relation to marginalised elements in Cuban society. In Cuba people have not been able to talk openly about racism, as officially it does not exist. The Revolution officially legislated against racism, and the official line has been that everybody is equal and happy together, but this is not the reality Campos-Pons has actually experienced throughout her life as an Afro-Cuban female.[352]

Therefore these were issues she felt were important to discuss and she wanted to

[351] Osvaldo Sánchez, "The Last of the Moderns," Catalogue (*Cuba: La Isla Posible*), (Spain: Ediciones Destino, 1995), 59.
[352] Campos-Pons interview, December 1999.

comment on the fact that racism, homophobia and *machismo* did exist in Cuban society and were problematic issues. Historically, Cuba's Afro-Hispanic patriarchal culture has always placed a strong emphasis on heterosexuality, with *machismo* widespread in Cuba. Furthermore, the lives of homosexuals inside Cuba in the post–1959 period, in spite of some dramatic improvements, have continued to be enveloped by outdated notions of homosexuality out of place in a modern and humane socialist society.[353]

Commentators have noted that the artist could be disputing the communist credo of equality among sexes and races, by calling into question gender roles and societal stratification through her art production. However, despite the obvious gender and race concerns in her work, Campos-Pons has stated that she never conceptualised her thought processes along the lines of western Feminist thought. For her, the topics of race and sexuality have been means for her to question her own identity and to deal with issues she deems important to discuss in the context of contemporary Cuban society.[354]

Despite her concern with gender issues, there is no overt association in her art production with any other Latin American female artists whose work has been associated with Feminist ideals. For instance, Campos-Pons admires the work of Ana Mendieta and Mexican artist Frida Kahlo in a general sense and she relates to these women as fellow artists. Her comments about Kahlo highlight this.

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[353] Lourdes Arguelles, and B. Ruby Rich, "Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Revolution: Notes toward an Understanding of the Cuban Lesbian and Gay Male Experience, Part I," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society* 9, no. 4 (1984): 698.

[354] Campos-Pons interview, October 1999.

"It is the still power of her work that intrigues me. I find it authentic and compelling and what is interesting is to try to understand the freedom and the kind of permission she gave herself".[355]

Campos-Pons did not discover Feminism as a movement until she left Cuba in 1988 to study at Massachusetts College in the U.S.. It was there and afterwards in Canada that she encountered a whole Feminist scene, where people frequently questioned her about this topic vis-à-vis her work and wondered how she could say she was not a Feminist artist. This was confusing for Campos-Pons, as she did not know enough about Feminist ideals at that time to make the assumption as to whether she was or was not a Feminist.

She had gained some exposure to Feminist discourses in Cuba during the 1986 Havana biennial, which included important Feminist thinkers such as Lucy Lippard. However, like the other Cuban women present at the biennial, she deemed the topics interesting but she questioned the absence of men from the discussion.[356] Her approach highlights her different worldview, deriving from a socialist ideological, social and educational context, which relates to the cohesiveness of males and females as Cubans, and how Cuban women believe that the discussion should not be about the separation of the sexes.

Living in the U.S. since 1990 has allowed her to gain a broader perspective on many topics, one of which relates to her heightened awareness of discussions around Feminist, gender and race issues and the convergence of some of these ideas with her

[355] Campos-Pons interview, December 1999.
[356] Ibid.

own.[357] With hindsight, Campos-Pons considers she is a Feminist and was raised with that idea by her mother and thus her early work dealt with themes that related to Feminism, as a natural development of her upbringing. Yet it was not a conscious Feminist statement from the artist based upon western theories of Feminist thought: it was more of a gesture intrinsic to her work. This may sound like a contradiction in terms, but from Campos-Pons' position there was no concrete information available about Feminist concepts within the parameters of the Cuban revolutionary process. It was not until she lived outside of Cuba that she became aware of those issues and debates. Although the FMC (Federation of Cuban Women) has similar ideals to some western strains of Feminist thought, it has different values and structure. As such, Campos-Pons has asserted that feminism has much to do with geographical and cultural context, as what may work in one particular country may not necessarily work in another.[358]

In terms of her self-perception, it is important to bear in mind that this artist was raised with the philosophy of Marxism and she grew up believing many things that related to socialist ideals. She was also surrounded by Afro-Cuban traditions and her mother worked very hard at maintaining a balance between the different aspects that surrounded the artist: spiritually, educationally and philosophically. The artist is grateful to her family for keeping her in touch with her African-derived heritage, whilst at the same time for being a child of *el proceso*. As an adult Campos-Pons has become aware of this dual process and the contradictions involved and she has questioned the way she was raised, religion and her intimate surroundings.

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[357] Lynne Bell, "History of People who were not Heroes. A conversation with María Magdalena Campos-Pons," *Third Text* 43 (1998): 38.
[358] Campos-Pons interview, December 1999.

"I am grateful to my family, that even between all my contradictions they managed to keep me in touch — [they would say] OK, you can be a Marxist but you still need to be cleansed [by the *Ila'orisha*]".[359]

The socialist dimension of her upbringing has not been shaken out of her system and the ideas that she was exposed to in her formative years have remained with her. She embraces many of the reforms that have occurred as a result of the 1959 Revolution and considers them important, in particular justice and the equality of all human beings, free education and access to health benefits. She is equally forthright, however, about the aspects of *el proceso* that she considers have been mistakes, such as the relentless bureaucracy, inefficiency, dogma and many other unproductive things that have occurred under the guise of Cuban communism.[360]

Afro-Cuban traditions have been present throughout the artist's life and her knowledge about them has stemmed from her family's involvement with such practices. Even though she has not been initiated into *Santería*, the artist's paternal grandmother was an *Ila l'orisha* and she grew up immersed in *Santería* and *Palo Monte* traditions, where she witnessed initiations, ceremonies and festivals. The artist recalls from her childhood days how Afro-Cuban traditions would take place covertly in the backrooms of practitioners' houses or masked by revolutionary holidays such as the 26th July festival. She also remembers how she did not speak about *Santería* at school, as people had been known to get into trouble for doing so. Instead, it was just accepted everyday practice for black Cubans.[361]

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[359] Ibid.
[360] Ibid.
[361] Campos-Pons interview, October 1999.

Yet despite her background, Campos-Pons' initial artistic interest in Afro-Cuban themes stemmed from the link she made between the ritual involved in Afro-Cuban traditions and the performance as a ritual in itself. Also, the presence of the body is very important in *Santería* rituals and the artist has used her body as a point of connection between Afro-Cuban religious traditions and her art performances. Her first live performance, *La voz del silencio* (*The Voice of Silence*) (1992) reiterated this point. Her body was the performance in this work, based upon her recollections of her deceased father and her African heritage and she felt the necessity to actually be there in a phenomenal sense for this piece, adding to the sense of ritual for her.[362]

The art production discussed in this chapter makes it apparent that is through our bodies that we belong to a place. The lived body is continually conjoined with place, and thus the deepest level of subjectivity is place-bound. However, for some of the women in this study their Cuban identity and the cultural discourses they have expounded have extended to cover topics that reach beyond the island of Cuba as a geographical location. Particularly for Campos-Pons, the Cuban Diaspora and emigration have had special resonance in her art corpus, iconography and her lived experience. This reflects how contemporary Cuban identity has been linked to the increasing Diaspora, as the emigration process has become a defining feature of Cuban existence from the late 1980s onwards. The next chapter will continue this discussion in relation to the artists in this study, beginning with an in-depth investigation of Campos-Pons' work and oeuvre following her relocation to the U.S. in 1990.

[362] Campos-Pons interview, December 1999.

Chapter Five

Space and (Dis) Place by Way of the Body

The existence of a continually growing Cuban Diaspora is an undisputed fact of contemporary Cuban reality. Related to, and in addition to this, all the women in this study have had the opportunity as artists to live, work and/or study in non-Cuban social realities and contexts. These experiences and their roles as professional, successful artists have placed them in unique positions from where they can voice their opinions about the Cuban situation at an important juncture in the country's history. This discussion must therefore extend beyond the borders of the island, to consider wider notions of space and place in response to the conditions of contemporary Cuban existence. As these women's considerations about what being Cuban means to them does not solely relate to their Cuban heritage, or to their physical, geographical and temporal placement in space. This indicates the complexity surrounding notions of Cuban identity in relation to place and leads to questioning the usefulness of concepts of location as visible entities for the understanding of culture and identity. Indeed, these women's art endeavours highlight that being Cuban is a mental construction with multifaceted associations. The lived body is not just where it is, nor just what it is, so we must allow that place is neither just where it is nor just what it is either: it belies simple location.[363] This chapter will explore these issues in relation to the artists' corpuses and their lived experiences on and off island.

[363] Edward Casey, "By Way of Body," *The Fate of Place: A Philosophical History*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 231.

Emigration and the Diaspora

Exile is a major historical phenomenon of our century and a focal point for artistic and theoretical reflections about cultural identity that is bound up with issues of place and nationalism.[364] Events surrounding the visual arts phenomenon in Cuba over the last two decades have been indicative of larger currents in Cuban society, namely, the changed parameters of that socialist system and the ever-increasing Cuban Diaspora, which is considered to be one of the most significant of our time.[365]

In its broadest sense, emigration designates every kind of estrangement or displacement from the physical and geographical to the spiritual. The 1959 Revolution impacted the trajectory the Cuban plastic arts by separating artists through exile, as well as the deliberate act of writing some important artists out of Cuban art history because they had chosen to leave the country after the inception of the Revolution.[366] Another consequence has been that some of the traditions of the Cuban imagination that had been evolving in generational developments pre–1959 were taken out of Cuba with the artists who left in the decades since 1959.[367] In this sense, one must consider that the Revolution has had repercussions in the visual arts, as artists both inside and outside Cuba have emerged without the benefit of the totality of all the Cuban aesthetic traditions.

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[364]Susan Rubin Suleiman, ed., "Introduction," *Exile and Creativity. Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances,* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 2.

[365] Antonio Eligio Fernández, "The Island, the Map, the Traveler" *Cuba — Maps of Desire*, ed. Gerald Matt, trans. Heidemarie Markhardt (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 19, quoting William Safran, "Diasporas in Modern Societies: Myths of Homeland and Return," *Diaspora*, 1991.

[366] Ileana Fuentes-Perez, "By Choice or by Circumstance," *Outside Cuba: The inevitable exile of artists*, (New Jersey and Miami: Rutgers University and University of Miami, 1988), 20. The misinformation campaign is evident from the extensive holdings of the National Museum of Cuba, which reveal that many important pre-revolutionary artists are missing - and who also happen to be in exile — these include Cundo Bermúdez and Mario Carreño. Thus reinforcing the idea that in Cuba to be an exile is to be an enemy of the State.

[367] Ricardo Pau Llosa, "Identity & Variations: Cuban Visual Thinking in Exile since 1959," *Outside Cuba: The inevitable exile of artists,* (New Jersey and Miami: Rutgers University and University of Miami, 1988), 41.

The Cuban nation has become "transterritorial" as a result of the large number of exiled citizens, as well as those who are not exiled but are currently living outside of Cuba.[368] It is now no longer possible to think of Cuba as limited to the island, if it ever was. The dynamics of this Diaspora and the sense of displacement it has created have affected the women in this study from their placements in and outside of Cuba, and their subsequent art production has been telling. Even for 1990s artists who have chosen to remain based in Cuba, their international art reputations have allowed them to study, travel and exhibit extensively. Therefore, although these artists' cultural heritage and ancestry is Cuban, their individual biographies have included exposure to other cultural systems and societies.

Unlike artists graduating in the 1990s, most of the 1980s Cuban art generations left the island at an exorbitant speed from the late 1980s onwards. This mass exodus has had massive repercussions in the Cuban visual arts, with artists and intellectuals relocating from Havana to Mexico City, and from there to Monterrey, Miami and New York. The reasons that have motivated these artists to leave Cuba are multifold and individual to each artist. They range from economic reasons, as well as for political, personal and ideological reasons. However, there has been an established understanding in Cuba that it makes a difference where one relocates to once deciding to leave Cuba.

The historical, cultural, political and demographic navel of the spatial dimensions of the Cuban Diaspora (for exiled Cubans and Cuban-Americans especially) is located in Miami, U.S., although Cubans are located throughout the world. In spatial terms, Cuba

[368] Gerardo Mosquera, "Contexts," *Cuba – Maps of Desire*, ed. Gerald Matt, trans. Heidemarie Markhardt (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 83.

and the U.S. are geographically close but are (at least officially) considered inexorably separate, and the small geographical distance between these two countries belies their immeasurable ideological distance. The polemical and troubled relationship between Cuba and the U.S. has a long history dating back to the nineteenth century, but the situation has been exacerbated by the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath, as the U.S. opposed it and has imposed a trade embargo on Cuba since 1961.

This situation has affected contemporary artists' decisions regarding relocation. For instance, Cuban artists have not been viewed as severing their ties with Cuba by leaving for Mexico or Europe in the same way they would if they decide to live in Miami. The case of Afro-Cuban poet and journalist, Pedro Pérez Sarduy who left Cuba in the late 1980s to live in the UK with his British born wife and their children is a good example. Sarduy returns to Cuba very frequently and has not encountered any official problems. But, he admits that if he had chosen to live in the U.S. his relationship to Cuba would be very different, both from the U.S. side and from the viewpoint of the Cuban authorities.[369]

Bearing this in mind, the places that Pérez and Campos-Pons decided to relocate to are illuminating. Neither of them should be considered as exiled Cubans because, as opposed to true exiles that cannot return home, they have always had the theoretical option of returning to live in Cuba from their placements abroad. Yet their life trajectories and relationship to the island have been quite different. Marta María Pérez's relationship to the island is markedly different than most of her artistic contemporaries who have chosen to live outside of Cuba, including Campos-Pons.

[369] Pedro Pérez Sarduy, interview by author, tape recording, London, August 2001.

Pérez's decision to leave Cuba was based on the island's dire economic situation and the advent of artistic opportunities elsewhere, as Pérez and her husband, Flavio Garcíandia were offered work through a Mexican gallery in the mid-1990s. Pérez is not interested in politics and she and husband considered Mexico as a safe and quiet place in a political sense in which to live and raise their children, unlike Miami. They lead a relaxed life in Mexico and consider it a good choice in terms of education and training possibilities for their children. Moreover, as professional artists, Pérez and Garcíandia have felt that they have peace to work as well as closeness and the ability to travel easily to and from Cuba.[370] Despite living in Mexico, Pérez makes a concerted effort to return to Cuba on a regular basis to visit family and friends, as well as to exhibit there as well as on the international stage. So, despite their geographical distance from Cuba, the ties remain strong and the artist has expressed her desire to return to live in Cuba some day.[371]

Pérez's artistic corpus has never sought to make specific reference to her actual temporal and physical placement in the world through her photographic enterprise. Despite the fact that she travels and works extensively overseas, has relocated to Mexico and previously to Germany, this has had no specific impact on her art production in formal, technical and content terms. For this artist one of the major benefits of living in Mexico has been easier accessibility to photographic materials, the mainstay of her art production.[372] Yet her photography completed outside of Cuba has dealt with the same

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[370] Email communication with Pérez dated 3 May 2001. "Me referia a Mexico como un lugar tranquilo, sobre todo desde el punto de vista político, no se reflejan traumas políticos (como los de la comunidad cubana de Miami), se vive relajadamente al respecto por parte de los cubanos que viven aquí. No estoy interesada en que la política forme parte de mi vida, y además desde el punto de vista practico y personal, vemos buenas opciones para la educación y formación de nuestras hijas. Así como nosotros tenemos tranquilidad para trabajar y cercanía para viajar a Cuba".

[371] Marta María Pérez, interview by author, tape recording, Monterrey Mexico, 1 March 2000.

[372] Ibid.

themes and utilised the same format. In that sense, her art has remained a constant that helps to denote her sense of self-perception and her connection to her homeland.

However, the same kinds of obstacles have not faced Pérez by her relocation to Mexico, as there would have been if she had moved to the U.S.. For a start both Cuba and Mexico are Spanish speaking countries. Furthermore, as another Latin American country, there has been less political, cultural and social upheaval involved for the artist, as Mexico is geographically close and has strong ties to Cuba. It is fair to say that Pérez's placement outside of Cuba has aided her art-making process in technical terms only, and her art practice has remained an insular endeavour not concerned with Mexican issues. Furthermore, Mexico does not have the African-derived culture that Pérez has required for her artistic enterprise, so whilst she has lots of emotional support and friends in Mexico, she has not drawn on the country's cultural and spiritual resources in her art.[373] It is therefore apt to state that Pérez's sense of being Cuban and her subsequent art production have not been affected by the conditions her displacement.

Whereas, her colleague, Campos-Pons' art production post–1990 has been affected by her displacement from Cuba and it has triggered an exploration of many issues relating to this. Campos-Pons married an American citizen whom she met whilst studying at Massachusetts College of Art in 1988, and they lived in Cuba for a year before they moved to the U.S. in 1990. The end of the 1980s into the 1990s was a particularly difficult period in Cuba on many fronts. On a personal level, Campos-Pons and her husband encountered harassment and prejudice in Cuba during the late 1980s because

[373] Ibid.

of the racial, political and cultural boundaries they had crossed as an Afro-Cuban woman and a white American male. There was the idea amongst some Cubans that Campos-Pons was "fraternising with the enemy".[374] Therefore, they made the decision to move to the U.S. because of the dire ideological and economic problems facing Cuba at that time and because of the racial and political tensions their relationship caused. However, the artist never left Cuba with the intention of leaving permanently.[375]

Campos-Pons returned to Cuba in 2000 for the first time in ten years, although she ensured that her young son (born in the U.S.) visited Cuba throughout the 1990s to develop his connections with his Cuban family.[376] By 2000, the artist had been officially invited to exhibit at the Havana biennial, highlighting the more relaxed attitude of the Cuban authorities toward artists residing outside of the country. This also demonstrates the political and ideological changes that have occurred in Cuba over the past decade and the impact on the visual arts spectrum.

Magdalena Campos-Pons

Since relocating to the U.S. in 1990, Campos-Pons has thought a great deal about what Cuba means to her, historically, geographically and socially.[377] She misses many aspects about the country and remains emotionally attached to it, and she believes it is important for her "work and soul".[378] She is proud to be a Cuban woman and proud of the achievements of the island in international intellectual debates. She also misses the

[374] Magdalena Campos-Pons, interview by author, tape recording, Jamaica Plain, MA, December 1999
[375] Ibid.
[376] Ibid.
[377] Lynne Bell, "History of People who were not Heroes. A conversation with Maria Magdalena Campos-Pons," *Third Text* 43 (1998): 33.
[378] Campos-Pons interview, December 1999.

stimulating dialogues she had with fellow Cuban artists and intellectuals, in particular people who were important to her development as an artist and a person, such as Flavio Garcíandia, 1950s artist Antonio Vidal, Gerardo Mosquera, Lupe Alvarez and Consuelo Castañeda.[379]

With hindsight from her placement outside the country, Campos-Pons has felt a sense of frustration about the situation in Cuba and about what the 1980s art generations were capable of achieving, yet did not because they were mostly spread in many geographic locations by the 1990s.[380] In keeping with her artistic and ideological training, she has pondered how to make a difference from outside of Cuba, and in the years since 1990 her work has been intended as building a bridge to Cuba, and specifically to her family and her African heritage. Her concern with issues of identity and how to reach other people through visual language have remained preoccupations in her thought processes and artistic endeavours. As such it has been vital for her to maintain visual and conceptual links to her homeland and to retain her sense of identity as an Afro-Cuban female, from her specific vantagepoint of living in the U.S..

Being Afro-Cuban has been a very significant factor for her work post–1990 and how she has defined her sense of identity as Cuban in the U.S.. From her placement off island and her geo-physical distance from everyday realities in Cuba, Campos-Pons has re-examined the issues that constitute her identity and their socio-cultural implications. Thus her use of African-derived iconography has developed as a result of these explorations and the changed parameters of her life have led her to consider the wider

[379] Ibid.
[380] Ibid.

implications of her displacement and her experiences as an uprooted Afro-Cuban woman. Her African and Cuban ties as well as personal memories have been the catalyst to help her find her place in a new country, by establishing connections with her past through her artistic endeavours. This has compelled her to consider the oral, performative, religious, cultural and historical traditions that have been the primary carriers of black identity in the Diaspora.

Since the very beginning of her career, her art production has raised controversial questions about her self-perception and place in society. Her new environment and lived circumstances have continued this process. In a profound sense, her geographical, cultural and spiritual distance from Cuba has helped her to understand her Cuban foundations and to contemplate her temporal, physical and social relationship to Afro-Cuban historical memory and to her African heritage. These ongoing, fluid explorations of personal and collective cultural history, identity, gender and religion have been documented through her art.

Despite her positive lived experiences as a black woman in the U.S., she has still had to contend with certain issues. The historically turbulent relationship between Cuba and U.S. may have added to her sense of marginality and alienation in that country. She has often been asked where she comes from because her way of being is not characteristic of an African-American female born and raised in the U.S..[381] And, race issues have confronted her son as a mixed-race male U.S. citizen growing up in that environment. This has forced the artist to evaluate her self-perception even further. These concerns about her son growing up in the U.S. context have not overtly permeated her work, but

[381] Ibid.

they have been underlying it. She has thought about her own exodus from Cuba in relation to her familial exile from Africa and the legacy of Cuban slavery, and how these complexities continue in the next generation with her son born in America.

In the Polaroid series of triptychs, *When I am Not Here, Estoy Alla* (*I am There*) (1996), the artist incorporated specific African-derived religious iconography as well as her own bodily trace. In visual terms the red background makes the artist's head and upper torso, depicted with an elaborate hairstyle with black, white and red beads and white vertical lines painted on her face, even more striking **[Fig.37]**. Her intricate hairstyle has connotations of status in some African communities, and the colours red and black refer to Eshu-Elegguá, the *Santeria* deity who opens the paths and guards portals, crossroads and other liminal points.

"It is about longing to some extent, but at the same time finding the space that you cannot grasp. I am here but I am there".[382]

Campos-Pons is both the subject and object of the performance in this Polaroid series, which were produced in her mind and performed and documented by her body. This is also the case with another photographic series, *Abridor de Caminos* (*Opener of the Pathways*) (1996), which consists of 10 photographs. This series draws specifically from the artist's *Yoruba*-derived background in the guise of *Santería* symbolism to produce a discourse on her sense of personal and cultural identity. The underlying reference is to her Afro-Cuban ancestry and the importance of *Santería* beliefs within her Cuban familial history. She presents her body as an *orisha* devotee and associates it with specific *orishas* as part of her ritual and artistic process.

[382] Ibid.

For example, one set of Polaroid's depicts Campos-Pons wearing a white cotton robe with white painted face and nails, standing and holding out a tray of white cakes as an offering, surrounded by coconuts at her feet. This piece makes direct reference to Obatalá, the major *Yoruba orisha* **[Fig.38]**. The title of this Polaroid, "*Above all things*," denotes Obatalá's role as the leader of things and as the major *Yoruba* and *Santería orisha* responsible for forming the Earth and man.

By using her own body in this image, the connotations associated with Obatalá are significant in the context of the artist's self-perception. The devotees of Obatalá are said to be persons of an iron will, reserved and proud, not used to lamenting the results of their decisions.[383] From my own experiences and conversations with Campos-Pons, I believe that the characteristics associated with Obatalá apply to her. Her portrayal as a devotee or incarnation of Obatalá through the trace of her own body suggests that the artist still desires to affirm her Cubanness and her Cuban heritage and identity. At the same time, she has accepted her personal life decisions to live and raise a family outside of Cuba, in the U.S..

She has remained very close to her Cuban family and they have collaborated on a number of her projects, by sending photographs, materials and researching topics.[384] By focusing on her own family experience and autobiography, she believes she has some authority to sketch the larger picture as she views it.[385] The installation *Umbilical Cord* (1991) **[Fig.39]** demonstrates this, as it was a visual way for her to establish a bridge between herself, Cuba and Africa. Her family collaborated on the project and it includes

[383] Natalia Bolívar, *Los Orishas en Cuba*, (Havana: Ediciónes Unión de Escritores y Artistas de Cuba, 1990), 83.
[384] Bell, 33.
[385] Ibid.

the bodily traces of her and her female relatives to represent the physical connections between her matriarchal family. This piece plays homage to the bonds that bind these women to each other. The work came out of Campos-Pons' wish to be with her mother, as they have a close and tactile relationship, which the artist misses immensely and has been without for many years.[386]

Unlike her contemporary Pérez, Campos-Pons did not make overt references in her work to her double emplacement as a female whilst she resided in Cuba, but she was not a mother then. In her early works she addressed the woman's body as a life-giving receptacle in relation to sexuality, procreation and male attitudes in Cuban society. But in *Umbilical Cord* the artist makes direct reference to motherhood and the emplacement of the female through her depiction of female bodily traces. Figure.39 elicits numerous metaphors about the artist's notions of home, place and the interceding distance traveled between them. She makes spatial and philosophical connections between the meaning of the term umbilical cord, as the crossroads where mother and child meet and the point of their physical separation, and her disconnection from her mother, her family and her Cuban homeland.

Using photographs of every female member of her family, this installation traces the sources of Campos-Pons' matrilineal history. Photographs of each woman's stomach have crosses painted on them and beneath each image a small marble plaque is inscribed with the woman's name. The photographs are linked to one another to denote their shared bloodlines in a visceral sense, and the image of the artist's grandmother is

[386] Ibid., 36.

strategically placed above the others, with "Africa" written underneath her plaque.[387] On the artist's own stomach image, small footprints are visible to reiterate that she has been the only female who has left Cuba. In a sense, she has stepped out of the family whilst still staying connected.

The actual placement of and use of photographs of her family members reiterates for Campos-Pons the close emotional connection she feels for her family and the geographical distance between them.[388] This installation also includes photographs of each woman's left arm connected to each other by red cord, plaster and Cuban soil, stretching from each woman's arm to another in a continuous fashion. In Cuban popular folklore, the left hand is associated with the heart, thus making an added symbolic gesture about the people Campos-Pons loves and feels connected to.

Campos-Pons' notions of personal and collective memory, of her displacement and the in-between space of a Cuban émigré have been major preoccupations in her life and artistic endeavours post–1990. In a literal and psychological sense, the issue of memory has been magnified for her as she resides outside her home country and her past. She has eloquently explored these thought processes in a three part series, *History of People Who Were Not Heroes: Growing up in a Slave Barrack*.[389]

Belonging is at least partly predicated upon locality, or a memory of locality, and Campos-Pons' locality is recreated in this series as particular places through her memory of their existence in the past. As with *Umbilical Cord*, this project has been a

[387] Ibid., 37
[388] Ibid.
[389] The first work was created in 1993, the following two in 1998 and 1999/2000 respectively.

very personal one. The series developed out of their conversations and memories of the town and they collected materials and information for it. In the three parts of the series, she spatially and temporally juxtaposes images and ideas relating to her hometown, childhood and family by combining fragments of memories, religious, mythical and personal iconographic symbols.

This series also admirably demonstrates the use of her body as a place itself, and as the site for discourse that has meaning in relation to her identity and sense of being Cuban. Her entire exploration of her ancestors and homeland is expressed through her and other female members' bodily traces, plus a stream of memory fragments in varied media formats, as embodiments of her family and their history. The depiction of these female images helps to visually codify the artist's sense of social and cultural displacement as well as the idea of continuity with her past.

The first part of the trilogy, *A Town Portrait: Memory Streams* (1993) [Fig.40], portrays the artist's hometown of La Vega. As the centre of the Cuban sugar industry, La Vega is a place strongly connected with slavery and is located in Matanzas province, a region with a rich history of resistance and communal effort.[390] The town has complex and conflicting meanings for the artist: it is the place where her family had been taken as slaves to work on a sugar plantation but it is also the place where she spent many happy years as a child and where her family still live. The portrayal of her hometown highlights Campos-Pons' sense of belonging to a highly localised place as a counterbalance to her own displacement and that of her family at particular junctures in their history. Figure.40

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[390] Michael D. Harris, "Meanwhile the Girls were Playing," Catalogue (*María Magdalena Campos-Pons. Meanwhile the Girls Were Playing*), (Cambridge, MA: *n.p.*, 1999): 13.

focuses on key architectural places in La Vega that most specifically define the artist's collective familial notion of place and rootedness. Moreover, her documentary approach in this installation sets out her version of the town's history, a history unrecorded in the official annals of the former slave town.

The second and third works of this series, *Spoken Softly with Mama* and *Meanwhile, The Girls Were Playing* (1998,1999/2000) [Figs.41/42], focus on the artist's family sphere. In *Spoken Softly With Mama*, she includes the traces of female bodies, as she did in *Umbilical Cord*, to connect her to her maternal past. The artist is implaced in the narrative concerning the daily lives of her female relatives. Their bodies, materials, objects, sounds and activities recalled the female sphere of mundane domestic chores, as a setting or a place for sisterhood and community when women spent time together. The artist was interested in how these essential tasks were characteristic of the history of black women's labour, but were not truly valued by the rest of society.[391] By recreating these chores, she sought to reassess and revalue her female relatives' lives and to create a very real connection to them by depicting their images and repeating their actions.

Meanwhile, The Girls Were Playing refers very specifically to the artist's childhood. It includes beautiful and intricate shapes, colours, videos and materials as memory holders of how specific objects, sounds and places can prompt one's recollections, good and bad. However, the motif of sugar underlies the entire series and serves to symbolise contrasting associations. It simultaneously conveys childhood associations with candy

[391] Jennifer L. Riddell, "Centrifugal Force," Catalogue (*Marfa Magdalena Campos-Pons: Meanwhile the Girls were Playing*), (Cambridge, MA: *n.p.* 1999), 3.

and carefree innocence as well as the reason for the middle passage to Cuba and the brutality of the sugarcane industry and slavery in Cuba. For as Campos-Pons has correctly pointed out, "sugar was the blood of the slavery in Cuba".[392]

There are many layers in this complex trilogy — formally and metaphorically — which reflect how and why this entire series represents a complex "psycho-temporal geographic journey" for the artist.[393] During her research for this project she discovered from her mother that the small apartment building in which she had grown up was the former slave barrack that her great-great Nigerian grandfather had lived in. This physical and spatial connection and the temporal passage from one generation to another indicate how this series has involved a journey by the artist into her own past. It encompasses memories of her African relatives' forced journey to Cuba and their enslavement in an alien culture, as well as her own voluntary departure from Cuba and her desire to keep her culture and heritage alive in her new lived environment.[394]

Through her own displacement the artist's sense of self-perception has crystallised around the notion of place and involves everything that 'home' represents for her. She has questioned her understanding of the past by confronting the interstitial space and experience between what one takes to be the image of our past and what is actually involved in the passing of time and the passage of meaning.[395] She has become aware

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[392] Harris, 19.
[393] Moira Roth, "Reading between the lines: the imprinted spaces of Sutapa Biswas," *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 42.
[394] Riddell, 4.
[395] Homi K. Bhabha, "Culture's In-Between," *Questions of Cultural Identity*, eds. Stuart Hall and Paul du Gay, (London: SAGE Publications, 1997), 60.

of how exile is rooted deep in her family's history and how she continues this process through her displacement in America.[396]

Her connection to her African and Cuban forebears has rooted and centered her in a profound sense and helped to heal the scars of her dislocation. Memories serve as a transparent bridge between places past and present for her, in the guise of songs, stories and practices handed down from her great grandfather to her father and mother, to her and then her son. These oral and performative traditions keep the connection to Africa alive for Campos-Pons and provide her with a living testament to the history of black displacement in the Americas. Through her art she integrates her lived experience within a larger Afro-Cuban historical context. But the entire *History* series also stands as a monument to the history of all black Cuban families, as well as presenting the artist's specific associations with her homeland and what that means for her.[397]

From her placement in the U.S., her reevaluation of her own slave ancestry has led the artist to reconsider the wider implications of slavery and the historical conditions and current status of Afro-Cubans.[398] Her artistic representation of locality is multi-vocal. Indeed, her work demonstrates how belonging itself can be a multifaceted and multi-layered process that mobilises loyalty to different communities simultaneously.[399] Therefore, Figures.40-42 can be read as meaningful on a social, racial, personal and cultural level, in which the artist's memories of the past are conducive to forging social

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[396] Bell, 38.
[397] Campos-Pons interview, December 1999.
[398] Harris, 10.
[399] Nadia Lovell, ed., *Locality and Belonging*, (London: Routledge, 1994), 4–5.

bonds with the present and future generations.[400] In that regard, this series is for her son in some respects, to pass on their shared Cuban and African heritage.[401]

However, Campos-Pons' personal history of La Vega and her familial record can also be read as a subversive way of remembering history, with a potentially political side to her commemoration and reinsertion of the discredited and marginalised black peoples brought to the Americas as slaves. Perhaps living in a country so polemical and polarised in terms of race issues as the U.S., and living there as an Afro-Cuban woman with a mixed race child, has emphasised these issues even more for her. From her self-perception as a woman who is geographically displaced and culturally marginalised, it may be her very identity as an Afro-Cuban woman that enables her radical re-vision of home and notions of exile.

As an intellection in three parts, the whole tone of the *History of People Who Were Not Heroes* trilogy is that Campos-Pons attempts to inscribe history from the ground up through the eyes of its participants. However, through this trilogy she not only endeavours to relocate the past, but also to resignify it.[402] In so doing she seeks to extol the lives and efforts of African-derived people to survive and to transcend the history of slavery that oppressed them, and by telling their stories the artist aims to reinsert them into history.[403] In that sense, Campos-Pons could be constructing a counter-view of the official historical account of slavery in Cuba and other New World contexts. As she gives an identity to the thousands of faceless and nameless Africans who were the

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[400] Ibid., 4.
[401] Bell, 35.
[402] Bhabha, 59.
[403] Harris, 18.

victims of slavery, and who were uprooted, displaced and excluded from their new societies.

What is very apparent from Campos-Pons' work post her relocation to the U.S., is that displacement has been strikingly productive for her. It would seem that the marginalisation entailed in forms of migration and dislocation has generated new perceptions of place and of the relationship between places for her.[404] Perhaps from her viewpoint as an Afro-Cuban woman living in a foreign land, these concerns have been more apparent to her. Yet she consciously tries through her art to work against the notion of any fixed identities associated with her, and her lifestyle choices indicate her "geographical and categorical transgressions".[405] She also believes that the current discourses on identity can become discussions of exclusion instead of a dialogue and, in that sense, identities can be painful, restrictive and dangerous.[406]

In relation to this, she utilises her body as a powerful icon and tool to redefine issues relating to identity, family, territories, exile and spirituality in her works, with her body effectively connecting the past to the present for her. Furthermore, the use of her and her family's bodily traces reinforces the deeply personal connections between her life and artistic processes. She presents female traces in many various manifestations in the *History* trilogy, and these bodies are viewed close up, fragmented and often performing minimal manoeuvres and gestures. These actions and bodies help to portray

[404] Linda Nochlin, "Art and the Conditions of Exile: Men/Women, Emigration/Expatriation," *Creativity and Exile*, (Durham NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 38.
[405] Harris, 13.
[406] Bell, 42.

a sense of the tradition from which the artist derives and the notions of survival, continuity and adaptation.[407]

Like other contemporary black female artists such as Sonia Boyce and Carrie Mae Weems, Campos-Pons has wanted to say something about history and its relation to culture and place. Boyce, Weems and Campos-Pons all seek to articulate other histories and positions of difference through their works. This is to highlight how history and historical narrative are subject to change from within the frame of representation, and from within the aesthetic, cultural and epistemological frame of visual art practice. For these women, history is not something that exists in academic tomes buried in the past. Instead they perceive the pre-existing frame of history as something that surrounds and engulfs their everyday lives.[408]

Like Campos-Pons, African-American Carrie Mae Weems uses her body, photographs and intimate stories of her family life to extend her work into a meta-narrative on the complexities of race, gender and class in American life.[409] But a distinct difference between Campos-Pons, Weems and black British artist Boyce is that Campos-Pons is displaced from the place where she grew up and where her family still resides. For displaced persons in general, the development of an effective relationship to place or to a lost ancestry is often a way of restoring a sense of personal and cultural identity.[410] For Campos-Pons this has taken the form of a politicised aesthetic and cultural

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[407] Julia P. Herzberg, "A Town Portrait: Memory Streams - History of a People who were not Heroes, Part I," (New York: *n.p.*, 1998, accessed 26 July 1999) ; available from http://math240.lehman.cuny.edu/art/campospons/TextTower.html ; Internet.

[408] Gilane Tawadros, "The Sphinx contemplating Napoleon: black women artists in Britain," *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 26, 28.

[409] Joanna Isaak, *Feminism and Contemporary Art — The Revolutionary Power of Women's Laughter*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1996), 174.

[410] Ibid., 153.

discourse on identity in which her 'Africanness' and 'Cubanness' are essential elements, mediated through the use of her body.

Campos-Pons' artistic creations are representations of crossing and exploring space and time, as syntheses of her, and her family's, cross-cultural experiences. A contemporary female Indian artist in a similar position, Sutapa Biswas, has stated in relation to her work that the themes of migration, separation and displacement are not straightforward equations. These are relevant for considering Campos-Pons' work and experiences. Biswas describes them as

> "Delineated by repeated conflicts: between near and far, intimacy and estrangement, integration and alienation and pleasure and pain".[411]

Like Biswas, Campos-Pons has developed a transcultural perspective through her internal and external conflicts and from her lived experience, which allows her to return with much complexity to the subject of the female body. Through her imprinted bodily spaces her artistic discourse expands the ways that culture, race, gender, history and memory help to share and form our identities.[412]

Campos-Pons purposely places herself in a third space, an interstitial space in her work. This is a space of dualities and many layers: between territories and where is home, between languages, between media, between performance versus ritual and about what happens there "in-between".[413] She is located somewhere betwixt and between Cuba, Africa and the U.S., belonging in all three places, and at the same time, not belonging in

[411] Roth, 36, quoting from Sutapa Biswas.
[412] Ibid., 42.
[413] Bell, 42.

any of them completely. In view of this, it is interesting that Campos-Pons does not make reference to her immediate American lived surroundings in her art production. On the contrary, living in the U.S. appears to have put the artist more deeply in touch with her Cuban and African heritage. Thus one could say that her sense of being Cuban has been heightened by the conditions of her displacement.

Formal Devices

The artist's works of art are multi-sensory, multi-layered, multi-meaning and multi-shaped experiences, representing syntheses of traditional and contemporary artistic, cultural and religious practices. They include diverse media including painting, sculptural objects, photography, site-specific performance, installations and video. Opportunities to study and live overseas have enabled her to expand the range of media she has worked with. For instance, in the 1990s she utilised video and Polaroid photography as tools and spaces in which to elaborate on the immediacy of the artistic process.

Through a variety of artistic formats, Campos-Pons addresses issues that relate to her identity, her displacement and her dual heritage and she moves these thought processes from private to public contexts. *The Herbalist's Tools* (1994) **[Fig.43]** aptly demonstrates this process. Unlike the works already discussed, this installation-based work pays homage to Campos-Pons' father and it is based upon her childhood recollections of accompanying him to the forest to collect plants. Although he was not a herbalist by trade, her father was very knowledgeable about herbs and plants and he collected them from the forest for the townspeople for medicinal and ritual purposes. The title refers to the machete and the *garabato* found in the installation, implements

used to cut and collect tree branches. Three columns represent three different trees found in Cuba: *La Ceiba*, the sacred tree, an Almacigo tree found in the backyard of the Campos-Pons' family home, and *La Palma*, the national emblem of Cuba. Each column has an opening to place offerings in and one contains cornmeal, which the artist's father would give as an offering before entering the forest. A glass bowl is placed on the top of each column inscribed with each tree's name, and drawings, photographs and frames containing fresh plants native to Cuba are hung on the walls.[414]

The combination of photos, painted and actual indigenous Cuban plants stand as symbols of Cuban herbalist practices. By creating such a multi-sensory record, combining sound, sight and smell Campos-Pons seeks to bridge the physical and spiritual distance from her homeland and reconnect to her father and her Afro-Cuban heritage. By opening up the trees to make places to add offerings, she replicates Cuban peoples' actions of leaving offerings in the bottom of trees to create little temples to recreate inside what is outside.[415] Furthermore, the openings in the trees have places for offerings, where the inside has the same texture as the bark on the outside, so reversing the dynamic of inside/outside. This makes reference to Campos-Pons' own 'reversed' personal life situation outside Cuba and to Cuban ritual acts.

The artist often incorporates a little piece of Cuba in the space of her artworks, whether in the form of a photograph, a memory, a proverb, song or a plant, as tangible connections to the Cuban environment from her placement outside the country. In a phenomenological sense, her utilisation of materials and objects associated with Cuba, such as tools, stones, plants and cowry shells, adds to her realistic representations of

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[414] Ibid., 38–39.
[415] Ibid., 39

Cuban traditions and practices and her memories about them. These objects also reinforce a sense of the physical connection between her and the Cuban land.

The use of specific sounds, objects and materials is a significant part of the construction of the *History of People* series to reaffirm the artist's sense of place. Figure.40 presents visual glimmers of her personal and familial recollections through its spatial and aesthetic component parts.[416] These consist of four memorable architectural elements: a doorway, wall, fountain and a clay distillery tower. The tower is a visual record of the sugar mill distillery, a place that has become a landmark over time and remains the most notable historical reminder of the sugar industry in La Vega [detail I]. The mill holds strong memories for the artist, not least because it was the first building she saw at a distance upon returning home to La Vega after she had left for Havana as a young adult.[417]

Doorways symbolise ideas of passage and liminality. Campos-Pons uses an antique glass door at the entrance to this installation to serve as a link between the past and the present, as the threshold between here and there, then and now. This door has photo transfers of people and scenes that hold personal significance for the artist, including the actual door from her home in *La Vega*. Inscribed into the clay bricks of the wall are several passages compiled from the artist's written familial recollections that recall her family's memories. The fountain also includes written passages that refer to her childhood remembrances and a video entitled "*Flowers*" reiterates the same ideas. Personal traces of the artist include her making a garland of tropical flowers into a

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[416] Herzberg.
[417] Ibid.

necklace and childhood songs gently sung by her, recorded onto black and white videotape and projected within the installation space.[418]

In Figure.41, the use of diverse media and spaces signify specific times, memories and places that hold significance for the artist. A gallery acts as an antechamber that beckons the viewer into another space-in-time, with three stacks of carefully folded sheets with words sewn in script along their edges [see detail]. Video images flicker across the stacked surfaces, with mini-narratives to introduce the themes of the videos in the inner section of the installation space. The first video in the antechamber depicts an image of the partial phrase "*para que su*" (*so that*) slowly being embroidered in a 30-minute approximation of the real sewing time. The second projection shows Campos-Pons wearing a simple white cotton top and skirt, unfurling a sheet onto which family photographs are briefly superimposed, then folding the sheet up and resting it against her stomach as the image fades away. On the third stack, pearls are rolled over a wooden floor, scooped up and then let loose once again.

Once inside the dimly lit inner installation space, video and photographic images are projected onto an arrangement of upright wooden replicas of ironing boards. These boards symbolise the many years of repetitive domestic labour which black Cuban women have endured. Campos-Pons juxtaposes the boards against the delicateness and elegance of a group of glass irons, which are positioned in front of the boards, to suggest the lives and time spent together by the black women who performed the domestic chores.

[418] Ibid.

The translucent coloured glass irons arranged at the base of the boards are placed in a configuration said to be reminiscent of an Afro-Cuban *collar de mazo.*[419] *Collares de mazos* are elaborately beaded necklaces used in Atlantic altar traditions that have a basic structure consisting of a circle of multiple bead-strands from which project tassel-like emanations. These elaborate necklace clusters are used on altars and are placed over richly worked cloths. In turn, these are draped over *soperas,* water-filled tureens that contain *orisha* spirits condensed in stones, the purpose of which is to crown and veil the face of the gods.[420]

Throughout this installation, white is the predominant colour motif, and is a colour commonly found in African-based Cuban altar traditions. As previously discussed, this colour is also associated with the *Yoruba* and *Santería* deity, Obatalá. Figure.41 includes the colour white in the form of cotton sheeting, the women's dresses, pearls and translucent surfaces covering the wooden boards. In symbolic terms, the traditional role associated with the *collares de mazos*, in conjunction with the white colour symbolism and the images of the artist's relatives projected onto the boards, could be read as investing the piece with the significance of a ritual ceremony to endow her ancestors with praise. Moreover, in formal terms, the artist's replacement of ordinary materials used for domestic chores with pretty coloured glass irons and luxurious fabric visually signifies and connotes how her female ancestors' lives surpassed their quotidian actions.[421]

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[419] Sally Berger, "History of a People who were not Heroes, Part II," (New York: *n.p.* 1998, accessed 26 August 1999) ; available from http://math240.lehmsn.cuny.edu/art/campospons/SpokenText.html ; Internet

[420] Robert Farris Thompson, *Face of the Gods — Art and Altars of Africa and the African Americas*, (New York: Museum for African Art, 1993), 167.

[421] Berger.

Figure.42 also evokes a specifically feminine aura, but with a gestalt-like feeling of childhood as well.[422] Memory fragments and glimpses of the artist's childhood are presented in forms meant to evoke the phenomenological ways in which childhood is remembered; through shapes, sounds, colours, games, songs and carefree feeling. For instance, one video image depicts brief clips of a childhood game called "*quimbumba*".[423] This pleasurable childlike aspect is contrasted against the darkened space of the installation, in which illuminated circular areas glow to suggest a feminine, dream-like world, detached from reality.

A large number of small, colourful cast-glass trivets are spread out in concentric circles across the floor, on top of three coloured fabric circles in yellow, green and blue, which visually form skirt-like shapes [see detail]. These circle shapes connote the idea of Campos-Pons and her two sisters as children, sitting on the floor with their skirts spread out around them. In the centre of each 'skirt' is a circle of silk organza onto which video images are projected. The activities in the videos suggest vague memory glimpses through a recurring cycle, complete with mesmeric and repetitive movements, to suggest a surreal world of recollection and association. In a phenomenological sense, these videos seek to capture the motion of childhood itself, as a fleeting period characterised by continual transformation, physical and psychological.[424]

The videos refer to the artist's mixed memories of Cuba and the dualities she carries with her, by juxtaposing the conflicting realities to be found in the same space or object.

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[422] Riddell, 4.
[423] "Quimbumba is a Cuban game that is entirely made by the players and it involves three wooden sticks". Magdalena Campos-Pons, email communication with author, 10 January 2002.
[424] Riddell, 9

One video image depicts sugar cubes being stirred in a fancy glass decorated with etched flowers on it. The glass reminds the artist of her grandmother's china cabinet, which contained beautiful, delicate glasses that had been collected over a long period and which the artist accidentally knocked over and smashed as a child.[425] This same image also overlaps with other memories of sugar for Campos-Pons, as s sugar is intimately bound up with the history of black slavery and the artist's relatives. Also, as a child growing up in the Soviet-inspired 1970s era, the artist recalls asking for "*agua de azúcar*" (*sugar mixed with water*), as she liked it very much and because there was nothing else to drink as it was a hard time economically in Cuba.[426]

The luscious materials, seductive colours and embroidered fabrics included in the third part of the trilogy follow on from the artist's interest in patterning and decoration evident in *Spoken Softly With Mama* (Figure.41). These materials relate to the idea that although one can have nothing in a material sense, one can actually have very beautiful and special things surrounding you at the same time.[427] They also refer to the overlap between having beautiful things in one's life and the discomfort associated with material goods. Luxurious things can trap one, and therefore one needs to question why they are desired. This is why the title and punctuation of Figure.42 imply a sense of duality. 'Whilst' the girls were playing, there was much more going on around them. This is grammatically implied by the word "Meanwhile" and the comma placed directly after it in the title. The title can also be read to refer to the fact that the artist and her sisters were unaware of the political and social situation surrounding them at that time.[428] This duality

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[425] María Magdalena Campos-Pons, interview with author, tape recording, Cambridge MA, October 1999.
[426] Ibid.
[427] Campos-Pons interview, December 1999.
[428] Riddell, 8.

fascinates the artist,[429] and the underlying message in this installation relates to how things are never as straightforward and simplistic as they may seem in childhood.

Figure.42 portrays the world as a place where Campos-Pons and her sisters are protected and unaware, happily playing in the former slave barrack where their grandfather once lived as a slave. They would sit on the floor in the apartment with their grandmother watching over them on the sofa, content and oblivious to the history of slavery that was their heritage and that literally surrounded them. They were oblivious as well to the polemical situation Cuba had been placed in since 1959, especially in relation to the U.S..

Thus on one level, Figure.42 can be read as paying homage to Campos-Pons and her siblings and their happy shared childhood as the title of the work implies. The sisters go about their childhood endeavours, playing their games like children anywhere in the world. Yet on another level, the skirt-like shapes can be read as formally representing the current situation in Cuba, with the sisters spatially and politically isolated from one another. In this reading, the skirt-like shapes form small islands to imply how the sisters are now separated like islands, analogous to Cuba's political, ideological and geographical situation.

The sense of separateness is visually reinforced by a large overhead video projection of Campos-Pons displayed on the rear wall of the installation space. The artist swirls around in a white dress underneath a white rectangular fabric canopy carrying an armful of flowers, which she tosses away in slow rhythmic movements. Occasionally, the

[429] Campos-Pons interview, December 1999.

action switches to the flowers being thrown back onto the canopy by unseen others. Campos-Pons performs part of a *Santería* ritual celebration, to infuse the narrative with the practices of *Santería* and her bodily trace, to add to her sense of emplacement within the work as a whole. Her face is not visible and the dark background of the video renders the artist's movements mysterious with the spatial and placed context unknown. The alternating pace of the video between regular and slow motion also reinforces the idea of her distance from present Cuban lived reality.[430]

The use of specific colours and iconographical elements associated with Afro-Cuban traditions and beliefs are also important in the *History* series, and indicate how they are embedded in Campos-Pons' life experiences and *Weltanschauung*. In particular, the colour symbolism in Figures.41/42 connotes her personal involvement with Afro-Cuban religious traditions. In addition to the colour white and its associations with Obatalá, the colours of the skirt formations in Figure.42 refer to the colours that the artist and her sisters dressed in as children, which relate to their specific *orishas*.[431]

Campos-Pons has always attempted to produce works of art that do not just function on a literal level, as she wants the viewer to make an effort to read her pieces in more metaphorical and layered ways. As already discussed the Cuban sugar industry and the repressive slave history it generated underlies the entire series, and the artist emphasises the (unheard) viewpoints of those who did not write the official history of *La Vega*. She does this by drawing on different elements of her family's life experiences to give a voice to the marginalised through her narrative of historical reconstruction. She

[430] Riddell, 7.
[431] Campos-Pons interview, December 1999.

documents the particular and everyday experiences of those considered insignificant in the grand schemes of history — the small account versus the large — to suggest that whilst personal memories are fragile and layered, they have importance and value too.[432]

Her use of layering in her works, in formal and metaphorical terms, refers to the artist's specific life experiences and her sense of a multi-cultural identity. Her displacement from her homeland has forced her to look at Cuba and her family through the lens of memory and the dualities and layers present in her own life and family heritage. The literal or implied presence of her relatives is particularly apparent, and it is her memory of this ancestral presence that grounds her art and bridges her exile in the U.S..

Word and Image

The written dimension to Campos-Pons' artistic discourses is often an important part of her endeavour to make critical statements about topics she feels strongly about. From her earliest works through to more recent ones, she uses titles and words within the art space to reinforce and elaborate certain ideas. The combination of images and written texts strengthens her artistic endeavours in relation to issues that concern her from her specific perspective outside of Cuba. She uses words to express her cultural, spiritual and physical distance from her native country, culture and language and her African slave ancestry.

For instance, the installation *Tra...* (1991) **[Fig.44]**, explores her sense of multi-cultural identity and dislocation on ideological and semantic levels. The title of this piece refers ambiguously to the Spanish terms *Travesía* (*to cross a distance*) and *Tragedia*

[432] Bell, 34.

(*Tragedy*), and to a progression of English words etched onto a wooden plank concerning the middle passage — *Transfer* — *Transgression* — *Tragedy*. In between these words, photo transfer canvas portraits of black Cubans are strategically situated to reinforce the idea of the pain of forced migration and the deplorable conditions that still affect many black people.

In a similar fashion, the title for the installation, *The Seven Powers Came by the Sea* (1992) **[Fig.45]** contains a politically charged statement about *Santería* and the middle passage. The term *Seven Powers* represents the *Yoruba* pantheon of deities and the importance of *Yoruba* culture in Cuba, as one of the main components of *Santería*. In visual terms, wooden boards are placed between the seven figures and inscribed with the names of the seven major *orishas* who watched over the slaves during their fateful voyages from Africa to the New World.

Campos-Pons' use of two languages in the triptychs, *When I am Not Here, Estoy Alla* and *Abridor de Caminos* (Figures.37/38) work with the images to articulate their deeper meanings. These Polaroid series are rhetorical constructions whose idiom is simultaneously visual and verbal.[433] For instance, Figure.37 is about translation and keeping the duality inherent in the title, as for Campos-Pons the notion of home relates to the U.S., Cuba (and indirectly to Africa).[434] Her use of two languages within the title adds extra weight to her dual sense of belonging and the problems of assimilation and transculturation, as she renegotiates her place between the 'here and now' and the

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[433] Armando Maggi, "Visual and Verbal communication in Francesco Pona's, *Cardiomorphoseos* (1645)," *Word & Image. A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 16, no. 2 (2000): 212.
[434] Campos-Pons interview, December 1999.

'there and then' in her ongoing artistic process.[435]

By using the combination of word and image the artist reflects how her sense of selfhood is derived in situ from dislocation. This demonstrates how belonging and locality often transcend local and national boundaries in order to encompass identity.[436] Moreover, the use of two written languages within the texts suggest that how Campos-Pons' identity is deterritorialised and she is located between places rather than bound to a particular land. This message is manifest insofar as the visual and verbal parts converse with each other.[437] To coexist here and there, or rather, to have here and there coexisting in the self is intrinsic to the reality of displacement, and the act of being in a place but not being entirely of it is an extension of exile or dislocation from one's homeland.[438]

In addition to Figure.37's title, the inscripted bodily texts in one particular image emphasise the complex issues that have faced the artist in moving from Cuba to the U.S. at a time when travel between them is restricted and the situation highly polemical. This particular black and white Polaroid includes Spanish language engraved across the artist's chest stating "*Patria una trampa*" (*Homeland is an entrapment/trick*) **[Fig.37a]**. This image can be read as the artist's attempt to move beyond the official restrictions imposed by countries and national boundaries, to comment on her sense of duality and her being-in-the-world as a multicultural being.

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[435] Herzberg.
[436] Lovell, 5--6, quoting Homi Bhabha.
[437] Maggi, 223.
[438] Pau Llosa, 59.

This visual/verbal interaction is apparent in the *History of People* series. The formal qualities of the word are enhanced and given a physical materiality by being spoken, sung, written on cloth and placed within architectural elements in the series.[439] The title of Figure.42 can be read on many levels as discussed in the previous section, adding to the meaning of the piece. Also, the written phrases in Figure.41, placed on the folded edges of the sheets and stating in Spanish and English "*para su hermano*" (*for her brother*) and "*para su hijo*" (*for her son*) allude to the artist's sense of multi-cultural identity.

The term "*para su hijo*" makes specific reference to the artist's American born son and their life in the U.S.. The term 'brother' has multiple possible connotations. It could refer to Campos-Pons' sense of patriotism for her country, her Cuban comrades, brother in this sense referring to all Cubans in a communist sense. It could also relate to her family who remain in Cuba, or brother could refer to her familial connection with Africa, in the sense of the term 'blood brothers.' Moreover, the juxtaposition of the words brother and son within the installation space connote by semantic association the spatial distance the artist and her family has traveled via exile.

Visual Narratives

Like Belkis Ayón's use of myth, there is an historical dimension in Campos-Pons' mythic images in which she attempts to establish perspectives between present, past and future. As such, these artists' works become devices not just to reproduce specific myths, but to renovate them because of their unique interpretations of them. Campos-Pons' artworks allegorically tell her history and allude to a sense of place, with her body

[439] Harris, 22.

often part of that process, but her work is not easily located in a distinct time or location.[440] However, a process of journeying is visible in her art production linked to her recollections of places and times, as fragments of memory occupy a sense of landscape.[441]

These ideas are developed in the *History* trilogy with the chronotopes of biography and threshold underlying the series and present in the narratives within each section. Historical and socio-public events are woven together with the personal in her genealogical historical construction, and at the same time the various crises and breaks in the artist and her family's lives are addressed. A conflated narrative mode[442] is employed in *A Town Portrait* (Figure.40), with the representation of multiple scenes and architectural elements in no consistent order of presentation. The temporal sequence is not communicated and the figure of the protagonist (Campos-Pons) is conflated, instead of repeated from scene to scene.

In *Spoken Softly with Mama* (Figure.41), the artist utilises a sequential narrative mode with each episode of her story contained within a separate frame and as a unit itself within the installation space.[443] The repeated appearance of the artist and her female relatives in various guises and places within the installation indicates specific events that relate to the artist's familial experiences through time. The third installment, *Meanwhile, The Girls Were Playing* (Figure.42) uses an active monoscenic mode to depict one

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[440] Ibid., 19.
[441] Roth, 36.
[442] Vidya Dehejia, *Discourse in Early Buddhist Art – Visual Narratives of India*, (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1997), 25.
[443] Ibid., 24.

moment of the artist's story, centered on her childhood memories and introducing the audience to her good and bad memories of Cuba as a reference to the narrative.

This series may also propose an alternative view of Cuban history explained through its narratives that is "archaeological" in the sense of the "layered discontinuities" presented.[444] A dialogic relationship is established between the narratives in the three sections of the trilogy that refer to the Cuba's sugar industry, slave history and the artist's life and ancestry. A dialogic relationship also functions between the narratives within each part of this trilogy. For instance, the mini video narratives projected in the antechamber of Figure.41 precede the main installation space and introduce the installation's themes about black female chores, domestic work and slavery. These provide a sense of narrative continuity that runs throughout the installation.

The video narratives simultaneously projected onto the wooden boards in the main installation space form a dialogue that merges the trace of the artist with the themes of family history, recollection and myth. In one video, the artist's feet alternate back and forth silently, turning and kicking her heels together three times. These actions are reminiscent of Dorothy in the Hollywood spectacular, *The Wizard of Oz*, who repeats these bodily moves whilst chanting "there's no place like home" in her bid to be returned there. This analogy signifies Campos-Pons' sense of being somewhere other than her home and her desire to be whisked back home. Her pacing in the video clip is matched by African percussion instruments and followed by a Spanish lullaby, which she sings. The inclusion of African and Spanish musical discourse adds a poignant note regarding

[444] Mary Kelly, "(P) age 49: on the subject of history," *New feminist art criticism: Critical strategies*, ed. Katy Deepwell (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995), 147.

the artist's identity and serves to question her notion of 'home.' She ponders where is home and what is home ultimately — is it in Africa or Cuba, or both?

In another video the artist conjoins the secular and the sacred by interweaving her contemporary story with an ancient Greek myth to integrate the past and present, the western and the non-western. Like Ayón, Pérez and Bruguera, Campos-Pons is interested in myths, seeing parallels between Christian and non-western stories. In this video narrative she reinvents a well-known Greek myth to make an analogy with her own predicament. Her fingers peel away the skin and the seeds of a pomegranate, which metamorphose into ripe red seeds cascading down in a river of red juice to become streams of red ribbons and cords.

In accordance with Pons's consistent artistic interest in myths, the iconography of the pomegranate alludes to the story of the Greek mythological character Persephone, who was stolen away to Hades by Pluto, the god of the Underworld. Persephone was subsequently enticed into eating a pomegranate seed, which meant that thereafter she would have to spend half of each year with her mother Demeter on Earth and the other half in the Underworld, forever caught between the two realms. The association of the pomegranate and the Greek myth in Campos-Pons' video illustrate her self-perception as someone caught between two cultures. This narrative also invokes ideas about adaptation and transition, which, by necessity, have been integral elements in her life. Like Persephone, Campos-Pons is caught between two or maybe three worlds — Cuba, Africa and the U.S.. This visual and metaphorical analogy she makes through the video narratives is her expression of the literal separation and displacement she feels between her familial, ancestral and immediate family. The iconographies in the two videos

display the chronotope of threshold, referring specifically to the important break in the artist's life: her decision to leave Cuba for the U.S. in 1990.

The video on the third board also addresses the artist's exile and multi-cultural lived experience through the threshold chronotope. Additionally, it also refers to the chronotope of biography. Campos-Pons is portrayed balancing a stack of sheets upon her head, onto which the embroidered words *"para su hijo"* and *"para su hermano"* are sewn, linking back to the narrative in the antechamber. The act of balancing the sheets on top of her head, in a manner traditionally used by African women, reiterates Campos-Pons' lineage and historical connection to African women, as well as to her Cuban ancestry and the slave trade.

A sense of continuity binds these three video-narratives together as they reach closure and end with still images of female members of the artist's family from different eras. Her maternal grandmother is shown wearing a white dress with her head leant against her hand, sitting at a cloth covered table with some flowers placed on it. The artist is depicted in the same pose, but dressed in a gold and yellow dress with a bowl of pomegranates next to her and her aunt is pictured from the 1950s. Two smaller boards depict turn-of-the-century photographic portraits of Campos-Pons' grandmother and aunt. The sheer organza covering the boards is embroidered with flowers and designs that replicate the patterns in the photographs, emphasising the ties that bind the women together and the artist's phenomenological artistic approach. Moreover the iconography of the artist dressed in a yellow/gold dress is in keeping with the colour of her 'skirt' formation in Figure.42 and her *orisha* — Oshun (goddess of rivers and fertility).

It is clear that exile has provided Campos-Pons with a fertile site for independent development and growth as an artist, with her body used as a place for discourse about her identity and her lived experience in a different culture.[445] Her early artistic preoccupation with gender and marginalisation issues has been replaced since 1990 by a strong sense of identity linked to her family and origins. As a displaced Cuban artist, she has embarked on a search for self-knowledge; a psychological and spiritual pilgrimage to find deeper ancestral links, and the combination of her body and its traces in her work secure by metonymy the presence of her African heritage.[446] Her desire to express the bonds of time, family, memory, religion and history have led her to blend a wide range of media with traces of her individual and her family in her art projects.[447] These trace elements include other bodies as well as materials, places, colours, stories, sounds, songs, photographs and words, in densely layered works charged with personal, sacred and historical reflection.

Sandra Ramos

Unlike for Campos-Pons, Afro-Cuban themes are not important elements to consider Sandra Ramos' sense of being Cuban and the artistic discourse she produces. Other issues take predominance in her work and she creates works that are neither all political nor all personal, but are often deeply unsettling. Indeed, a leading Cuban art critic has described the vision of Cuba that Ramos depicts as,

[445] Roth, 34.
[446] Kelly, 153.
[447] Berger.

"One of the most sad and dramatic commentaries of contemporary Cuban art".[448]

Her art endeavours can be read as poignant artistic discourses set within personal parameters that inform about current lived social realities for Cuban people on island. She has a very developed sense of her social responsibility, which has meant that her art production since the early 1990s has focused on everyday problems and issues faced by Cubans, specifically the Diaspora and developments and changes in revolutionary ethics and ideology. Ramos reflects on the fate of the Cuban nation and its people and explores and portrays issues of importance for the country and its people. In particular, how Cubans have become increasingly exposed to neo-colonialist tourism and fragmented by the increasing dislocation of family/friends. These are not issues that are discussed in the official Cuban press, but people are concerned about them. So, Ramos addresses these issues, as she believes that visual art and artists should attempt to bring critical consciousness by questioning what happens around them.[449] Her art can thus be said to speak of contemporary Cuban reality, of her reality and *Weltanschauung,* and, as her lived experiences take place in Havana, the city inspires her work.

The artist's early prints could appear as a series of illustrations for an intimate autobiography as traces of her image and life often appear in those pieces. She incorporates a female facial image, an eighteenth century young Dutch queen with a striking resemblance to her own, in her early 1990 prints.[450] She also includes the female form in the guise of Cuban *jineteras* (*prostitutes*) and geishas in early works such

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[448] Orlando Hernández, "Alcohol and rubbish or Sandra Ramos' discovery of the other Atlantis," Catalogue (*Immersions and Burials*), (Mexico: *n.p.*, 1999).
[449] Sandra Ramos, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, 26 February 2000.
[450] Sandra Ramos, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, 12 February 2000. Unfortunately, the artist does not recall which queen.

as *Easy shopping* (1989) [Fig.46].[451] By 1993, other female images began to appear in her work, a mixture of the Dutch queen's image combined with her recollections of her own childhood and the figure of Alice from "*Alice in Wonderland*" by Lewis Carroll. Ramos used this mixed image to make emotionally charged statements and to experiment with personal alternative identities that she felt could also be applied to any person.[452] This signifies how she has utilised her own image to represent something of her own worldview and something more generic at the same time.

An important dimension to her artistic endeavours is the recuperation of individual and collective Cuban memories, as these issues form an important part of the Cuban collective memory and consciousness.[453] This powerful presence of historical memory in some of her images takes the form of a dialogue with certain historical figures that have formed an integral part of Cuban national consciousness. The particular figures she focuses on — real and imaginary — are juxtaposed with the traces of her body and other bodies, and the dialogue addresses questions raised by successive generations of Cubans. These relate to the island's history, the way in which Cubans have been educated since the 1959 Revolution and the ideals they have as a result.[454]

The diptych *Monte soy/Y en los montes* (*I am a mountain/And in the mountains*) (1993) **[Fig.47]** from the series *Manera de matar de soledades* (*Ways of killing solitude*) is an apt example. This diptych depicts the physicality of Cuba via Ramos' body and draws from the artistic tradition that associates the concepts of the island, homeland and the

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[451] Marilyn A. Zeitlin, "Luz Brilliante," [Catalogue-online] (Arizona: Arizona State University, 1998, accessed 2 November 1999) ; 23. Available from http://asuma.fa.asu.edu/cuba/essay.html ; Internet. *Jinetero* or *Jinetera* literally translates as jockey and refers to those Cubans who try to survive as prostitutes, or by offering other commodities or services that the tourist economy demands.
[452] Ramos interview, 12 February 2000.
[453] Ibid.
[454] Antonio Eligio Fernández, "Tania Bruguera," Catalogue (*New Art from Cuba*), (London: *n.p.*, 1995).

female form. Figure.47 presents a curled up female Alice/Sandra/Queen figure as a mountain and as the island of Cuba in the respective prints, to put across the notion of the artist's Cuban identity as bound to the Cuban soil as well as to its culture and people.

These ideas are also connoted through the prints' titles, which refer to José Martí's discourses about Cuban identity. Ramos rereads Martí on a very regular basis, as do many Cuban intellectuals. Martí's poems also form an important part of Cuban historical consciousness and her inclusion of his ideas relates to her identity as a Cuban citizen and an artistic intellectual. Martí was a prolific writer in many forms, including lyrical poetry and the words from Ramos' diptych — "*Monte soy*" and "*Yen los montes*" — form part of a poem from a book of his poetry, *Versos Sencillos* (*Simple Verses*).[455] This was a critically acclaimed work, which critics agree represents the most sincere expression of José Martí, the poet.[456]

Versos Sencillos reveals Martí as a master poet and thinker. As the title implies simplicity and romanticism pervade these poems because Martí was a poet of the people. He cast his lot with them and elevated the expressions of quotidian life to the art of verse. Indeed, Martí believed that poetry should have "its roots in the soil and its base in real fact". This fell in line with his social preoccupations and spirit of reform and he viewed ideas and words as "weapons in the fight for a better world".[457] But also, as Latin American poet, Gabriela Mistral has commented

[455] These poems were written in 1890 in the Catskill mountain range, U.S..
[456] Philip S. Foner, *José Martí: Major Poems*, trans. Elinor Randall (New York: Holmes & Meier Publishers, 1982), 13.
[457] Ibid., 15, quoting Martí.

"...because of his populist behaviour, the verse of Martí reverberate in the ears and are fixed in the memory like a ringing tune".[458]

The principle feeling that Ramos conveys in Figure.47 is the same idea that exists in Martí's poems; the idea of feeling a connection with the land and feeling that one belongs to a place.[459] This connection to a place relates to a sense of belonging and locality, as markers of identity often extend beyond individual experiences to a nostalgic longing for a place. Figure.47 can be viewed as a way for the artist to express her notion of belonging, which is instrumental in the construction of collective memory surrounding place.[460]

Another work from the same period that draws from the Cuban literary tradition is *La maldita circumstancia del agua por todas partes* (*The accursed circumstance of water everywhere*) (1993) [Fig.48]. The title of this work is taken from Cuban poet, Virgilio Piñera's (1912–1979) poem *La Isla en Peso.*[461] Like José Martí, Piñera discussed issues of identity and the Cuban condition as well as the social, popular and ideological attributes associated with place, and his poems often described a "suffocating, grotesque panorama" linked to Cuba's island condition.[462]

Water is a recurring feature in the cultural discourses expounded by Ramos about her identity and home, and the concept of water ties in with the Cuban landscape and the nation's island status. Water is a historically important element in Cuban folklore relating to the insularity of Cuba as an island surrounded by water. The understanding of this

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[458] Gabriela Mistral, "El Silencio de los sencillos en Martí," *Alat* X (Puerto Rico, 1939): 14.
[459] Ramos interview, 26 February 2000.
[460] Lovell, 1.
[461] Ramos interview, 26 February 2000.
[462] Fernández, "The Island," 15, quoting Virgilio Piñera, *La Isla en Peso*, (Havana: Ediciones Espuela de Plata, 1944).

insularity was clearly anticipated in Piñera's pessimistic vision, which might explain why his writings and vision have been utilised by other contemporary Cuban artists aside from Ramos, such as Ibrahim Miranda and José Bedia.

Indeed, the special condition of being an island has been a preoccupation in the new Cuban art. This sense of insularity has become the synonym for a more profound isolation that has resulted from Cuba's ideological and geographical solitude. Insularity stands for being remote from everything and everybody, as Cuba continues to suffer from the political, economic and ideological effects of the U.S. blockade and the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc. This interpretation falls in line with one of the contemporary pillars of Cuban political ideology: the idea of a country boycotted and besieged.[463] Isolation in Cuba is both reality and metaphor: a national condition imposed upon it and upon itself.[464]

These ideas about insularity and isolation can be applied to Ramos' bodily portrayal of the island of Cuba in Figures.47/48. These pieces have similarities in their basic formal and iconographical details: the artist's body stretched out to resemble the Cuban landmass, especially in Figure.48, which more correctly depicts the island's curved shape and the surrounding sea. The geographical isolation of Cuba is more evident in this print too, as a land surrounded by water on all sides, in addition to the political and psychological isolation that the country and its people have experienced.

In both prints, tree trunks shaped like stakes or nails are strategically placed on the

[463] Ibid.
[464] Zeitlin, 2.

artist's body at specific bodily points — head, eye sockets, breasts, groin and legs — to suggest the artist's ideological and physical repression and her inability to freely live, see and move. The colours and starts and stripes of the Cuban flag vividly portrayed on the trees in Figure.47a correspond to the tree with the attached flag located on the top of the curled up figure in Figure.47. The colours on the trees in Figure.48 are more muted but the inclusion of an historical Cuban landmark, Castillo del Morro, formally locates the island's capital and the history of battles and revolution in the country's history.

The map of Cuba is a common theme in contemporary plastic art practices as a graphic emblem,[465] and the cultural and social politics of the Cuban landscape have contemporaneous relevance as locators or markers of identity.[466] Maps of Cuba and a focus on its island nature can thus be viewed in relation to how Cubans locate and perceive themselves. Ramos' representation of the map of the island intermeshed with her own body could connote her personal sense of isolation and pessimism inside Cuba as well as referring to Cuban peoples' desire to travel and/or leave the country. As maps conjure up through their very presence notions of exploration, travel and travelers.[467] It was in this vein that Cuban writer, Antonio Benítez Rojo observed,

> [The] insularity of the inhabitants of the Antilles does not dispose them towards insularity, but rather the contrary: towards travel, exploration and the search for river and sea routes.[468]

Figures.47/48 indicate that Ramos' notions of belonging are moulded and defined by her actual territorial emplacement in Cuba. The emotional attachment triggered by her

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[465] Fernández, "The Island," 14.
[466] Lovell, 11.
[467] Ibid., 17.
[468] Antonio Benítez Rojo, *La Isla Que Se Repite*, (Hanover: Editions des Nortens, 1996), XXXII, quoted in Fernández, "The Island," 17.

locality and sense of social belonging provide the necessary elements for imprinting memories of place onto her body.[469] The Cuban landscape is inscribed onto Ramos' body through the mutual positioning of humans within nature and nature with society, while stressing the political dimensions of the appropriation of landscape. This process relies heavily on memory to perpetuate its existence. Therefore, the inscription of her body with nature transforms the relationship between humans and nature into a dialectical process embedded in memory.[470]

Ramos' sense of identity and belonging to the Cuban nation also includes the incorporation of fictional pre-revolutionary characters, as representative symbols and traces of the historical and social collective Cuban consciousness. These characters, as components of popular culture, derive from the populist tradition of Cuban newspaper cartoon characters. In various prints, Ramos presents Liborio and Abela's Fool, or "*El bobo*" (*the fool/idiot*) in their original visual format but with added colour, as they were originally black and white cartoon images. *El bobo* was, as indicated by his name, portrayed as being rather stupid although he made some very poignant comments on social and political matters. Cuban Modernist, Eduardo Abela gained national recognition as a critical voice against the 1920s/30s Machado dictatorship through *El bobo's* comical socio-political comments in the national daily Cuban newspaper *Diario de la Marina* (1930-1934).[471] The use of cartoons, as a mass media format channeled through the mode of a daily national newspaper, placed Abela in a powerful position from which to criticise the political, social and cultural situation.

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[469] Lovell, 6.
[470] Ibid., 6–11.
[471] Juan A Martínez, *Cuban Art and National Identity*, (Gainesville, FL: Florida University Press, 1994), 151.

Therefore, as a mode of discourse it was a very effective platform to communicate ideas to a much wider spectrum of the public than could be reached through the more academically valued artistic forms of painting and sculpture. As such, this character became part of Cuban popular culture and historical consciousness. In a similar manner, the cartoon character named Liborio, depicted as an elderly man with a moustache wearing casual clothes and a hat, was a fighter in the wars of independence against Spain. Through the cartoon format he represented the voice of the people in a very clever manner, and although he never spoke he still commented very much on Cuban issues through visual means.[472]

These figures are essential components in Ramos' 1996 series, which comprise a number of rectangular shape prints with dollar signs in the corners denoting American money— *La lección de historia*; *El fin de la inocencia*; *Los problemas del peso*; and *Recibimiento en la Havana* (*History lesson*, *The end of innocence*, *Problems of the peso*, *Welcome to Havana*) (1996) — **[Figs.49-52]**. Liborio and *El bobo* are juxtaposed with the trace of other figures in these works, including George Washington, the Alice/Sandra/Queen image, *jineteras* and tourists to highlight the negative social effects that the tourist economy has brought to Cuba. The artist's ingenious use of the shape of U.S. dollar bills for the prints formally indicates the importance of tourism for Cubans and their economy. These works also indicate Cuban people's craving for consumer goods and the irony that without access to dollars ordinary Cubans live on the edge but with them they can afford basic necessities. Thus the American dollar has become "the new Cuban Godhead".[473]

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[472] Ramos interview, 12 February 2000. There is a common saying in Cuba that when the government spends money on expensive projects, people say mockingly "Liborio will pay".
[473] Penelope Richardson, "Varieties of Havana: the 7th Habana Bienal," *Third Text* 55 (2001): 101.

In addition to dollars becoming the tourist currency of Cuba in the 1990s, visitors are segregated from Cubans and required to spend their dollars in specified hotels, restaurants and taxis. This separation indicates how Cubans are controlled by the state. However, Cubans have to struggle to earn U.S. dollars in order to pay for basic commodities and the major way for them to do that is through involvement with tourists. Tourists can also provide a route out of Cuba for some Cubans through marriage or just access to foreign currency through prostitution. So even though revolutionary ideals are still taught in schools, there is a danger that the hardships and necessities of daily living have mostly replaced idealistic utopian views because of the need to survive.

Ramos alludes to these ideas in this series. For instance, in *El fin de la inocencia* (Figure.50) the Alice/Sandra/Queen figure lies down next to an image of George Washington, paralleling the actions of the many Cubans (women and men) who make a living from foreign tourists from capitalist societies who visit Cuba. This image and its title connote the dramatic contemporary ideological shifts that have occurred in the terms of *el proceso's* aim to eradicate prostitution, which had been rampant before the Revolution under Batista's dictatorship.[474]

The female image and bodily trace of the *jinetera* appears in Figure.52. As in earlier prints, Ramos portrays the *jinetera* in caricatured fashion, decapitated and dressed in a bikini with oversized lips. She is presented as a grotesque whorish vision of a woman, as a sign or signifier of Cuba's corrupt social order and reality. The artist also makes an analogous connection between Japanese and Cuban gender and social realities in some

[474] Zeitlin, 4.

other prints, utilising Japanese woodcuts as formal and ideological sources of inspiration in relation to the Cuban situation.

Estampas de Ukiyo-e tropical {II} (*Stamps from tropical Ukiyo-e*) and *El fabuloso viaje de Santo Kyodei y la geisha Wakamara Daki por las Indias Occidentales {II}* (*The fabulous journey of Santo Kyodei* and *geisha Wakamara Daki in the West Indies*), (1992) **[Figs.53/54]** present visual and textual records of Cuban daily reality, complete with geishas and decapitated *jineteras.* Images of geishas were used in Japanese woodcuts to comment on and express the reality of daily life in Japan and Ramos views geishas as representative of issues of difference and otherness. At the same time, the geisha also serves to represent a sense of familiarity between the social realities of Cuba and Japan for her, in terms of forms of prostitution and stereotypical tourist conceptions and images of their respective countries.[475]

The characters used as well as formal and iconographical elements in Figures.49-52 effectively highlight the problems faced by contemporary Cuban society and how they overlap with those from the pre-revolutionary period. Ramos' incisive critique of current Cuban societal ills indicates the measure of corruption tourism brings with it. Cuba is portrayed in her prints as a neo-colonial holiday paradise, complete with *jineteras*, Cuban rum bottles, airplanes and tourists, just as if the Revolution had not happened. From the artist's perspective, tourists come to Cuba and enjoy all the pleasures associated with a tropical, exotic island, but they do not see the actual lived reality as it is for everyday Cuban people struggling to get by. Prostitution is rife and there is a vast

[475] Ramos interview, 26 February 2000.

bureaucratic incompetence that affects almost every realm of daily life, especially the domestic sphere, which include a chronic housing problem as well as fuel and food shortages.

Another very important aspect of Cuban lived reality is the phenomenon of the Cuban Diaspora and emigration, which Ramos has explored in her art since mid–1990s is the plight of the *balseros*. Her interest in this topic reflects the general thematic of exile and the Diaspora present in contemporary Cuban film production as well as in the visual arts. However, the *balsero* phenomenon is not a new one in Cuba, it has been going on for decades but has become much more publicised due to the dramatic increase in the numbers of *balseros* who have tried to leave the island in the 1990s.

Balseros tend to come from the poorer sectors of Cuban society and, unlike artists and other intellectuals, they have little chance of obtaining official visas to leave the country. Before the mid-1990s, those *balseros* who made it to the Miami shores were welcomed by the U.S. authorities as evidence of Castro's political oppression and popular discontent among ordinary Cubans with the communist regime. Those that did not make it to U.S. soil became shark food and were used by the Cuba government as propaganda against illegal emigration. However, since the mid-1990s, even the *balseros* who actually arrive in the U.S. on makeshift rafts have been returned to Cuba, where they have been politicised by the Cuban authorities as examples of restrictive and arbitrary U.S. immigration policies. With so much attention focused on the *balseros,* it seems hardly any wonder they became the most common image in Cuban art during the 1990s.

The *Migraciones II* (*Migrations II*) (1994) **[Fig.55]** installation, exhibited at the Fifth Havana biennial, relates to the fate of the *balseros* and is in remembrance of them. It consists of ten open suitcases placed against a wall, lined on the insides with painted scenes including the sea, car tyres, skeletons, sharks, consumer goods and traces of human bodies. All these objects relate to the reality of the *balsero.* Luxury goods represent their dreams because consumer goods are unattainable to the average Cuban, but are readily available to Cuban exiles. One suitcase depicts a man floating in a red boat in the bottom section of the trunk, whilst his dreams of consumer goods appear in the top section [detail II]. In another, the perils of a sea crossing are highlighted with a man and woman afloat in the nighttime sea surrounded by mines, with an U.S. flag just visible above the waves [detail I]. Some familiar Cuban figures are included — Che, Martí and Liborio — in the top section of one trunk, to suggest a sense of Cuban historical tradition and identity and what the *balseros* are leaving behind. The artist's trace also appears in the bottom section of one trunk, as the Sandra/Alice/Queen image wearing a red dress [detail III]. Her reclining position resembles the shape of the island as in Figures.47a/48, with sharp pointed objects placed along the top section of her body, the north coast of Cuba as it were, facing out toward the U.S.. Planes are visible, flying over the island to reiterate the difference between those that are able to travel freely by air to and from Cuba and those that must leave covertly via the sea.

Criaturas de isla (*Island creatures*) (1995) **[Fig.56]** continues the *balsero* theme. Five painted suitcases and objects are scattered within the installation space on a bed of sand with waves painted on the wall behind them. One trunk depicts the artist's bodily trace underwater holding up Cuba, with a red heart, branching veins and a tail made of

blue and white beads, whilst the island of Cuba located on top of the artist's head is signified by green beads and outlined with pearls [detail II]. Ramos' bodily mermaid imagery is reminiscent of Frida Kahlo's visual imagery and she admires Kahlo's work. Both artists have portrayed bodily insides such as blood, veins and organs in order to produce discourse about the intimate connection between their own body and the land of their births.[476]

Other bodily traces in *Criaturas* include dolls, skeletons, fishes with human faces and lifeless bodies in the sea and set within an underwater cityscape of high rise buildings framed by soaring waves, to emphasise the futility of escape [detail I]. Bound up with these images is the longing to leave and the tragedy of those that must leave as *balseros* and the dangers incumbent in that process. For instance, one small chest lays open to reveal wooden dolls representing a slice of a swimmer's body between blue waves and a male figure being circled by sharks.

The *Inmersiones y Enterramientos* (*Immersions and Burials*) (1999) series continued to explore the possible fates of the *balseros* and the aspirations of those who remain in Cuba. It comprises four pieces: two interactive video-installations, one inside a metal beer pipe and another inside a refuse container; an installation made up of 100 glass tears, filled with water and hung from a ceiling; nine drawings on mirrored paper. These various pieces explore Cuban social realities and the manifestations of marginalised city culture in Havana. As well as the desire and mental capacity within each human being to dream of something better.

[476] Ramos interview, 12 February 2000.

The group of drawings, *Los ciclos de agua* (*Cycles of water*) (1999) **[Fig.57]**, form a cycle of water intermixed with the artist's own face that represent a variety of themes: rain, sea, words, roads, poison, sadness, tornado, vision and time. In phenomenological terms, the mirrored paper images are mounted over convex supports and placed in a horizontal line to physically resemble the ocean waves. Cuba's island status and the *balsero* phenomenon account in part for why water is a recurring theme in Ramos' art, but these drawings also relate to the connectedness of the human body with place and nature.

> "We are connected with nature — all things in nature are represented in us and we are represented in all things in nature. I think this is the same idea as in the *Monte soy* diptych, even though it was done years earlier.[477]

Moreover Ramos considers the close relationship between water and the woman's body, as water is the fundamental element that links everything in nature.[478] It contains the essential mystery of life and its cyclical nature. It is both the beginning and the end, symbolising birth, death and escape.[479] Indeed, the entire *Inmersiones* series has been described as a "huge liquid metaphor," as all Ramos' visions happen inside or through water.[480]

The artist uses water to symbolise her feelings of loss and pain about the social problems facing Cubans and to reflect the human reality of the Diaspora from inside the island. She thinks critically about the lived realities facing Cubans in the contemporary period and tries to relate to existential ideas and everyday social problems, as she wants

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[477] Ramos interview 26 February 2000.
[478] Ramos interview 12 February 2000.
[479] Hernández.
[480] Ibid.

Cuban people to relate to the issues when they view her work.[481] For instance, the glass tears in *¿Por qué se parecen tanto la lluvia y el llanto?* (*Why does the rain look so much like a flood of tears?*) (1999) **[Fig.58]** from this series represent the tears and sadness felt by Cubans and their sense of hopelessness with regard to a solution to their problems. As ultimately there is no solution and the various forms of marginalised city culture that have developed have not been enough to solve Cuba's social problems.[482]

In an ethical sense, Ramos is concerned that many people on island perceive of life off island in idealistic terms. Often for those that have never travelled outside of Cuba their expectation is that everything is so much better elsewhere. Ramos wants to convey the idea that in reality, wherever one is located, it is difficult to discover what it is that will make one happy in life.[483]

Formal Devices

Like Ayón, Sandra Ramos studied printmaking but her artistic corpus incorporates many diverse materials and mediums, which include prints, paintings, drawings, sculptural pieces, site-specific installations, multi-media and video. The travel opportunities available to her as an artist have also helped her to develop new ways to express, and her aim is to continue to experiment in new aesthetic directions and to explore their conceptual potential.

[481] Ramos interview, 26 February 2000.
[482] Nina Menocal, "Sandra Ramos: Immersions and Burials," Catalogue (*Inmersiones y Enterramientos*), (Mexico City: *n.p.*, 1999).
[483] Ramos interview, 26 February 2000.

"In five years time I may go back to printmaking, but I would like to experiment with all the tools and then choose which one I want to use at any one moment". [484]

Despite her eclectic choices of artistic medium, there is continuity throughout her artistic corpus in philosophical and content terms. She is consistently concerned with expressing Cuban reality she experiences it and engaging with stories that belong to the collective memory and that have relevance for the Cuban population. This is apparent in Figures.49-52, and the rectangular shape and dollar symbols in these prints add a poignant extra dimension to the topics being presented.

Arguably her most distinctive and unique art endeavours are *Migraciones II* and *Criaturas de isla*. In these the artist balances the three-dimensional and the pictorial in an unusual, clever and serious way through her use of luggage trunks and suitcases. Her use of suitcases effectively conjures up notions of travel and movement from place to place and denotes the longing for place that Cubans feel. This longing is intricately connected to the sea and Cuba's island nature. These suitcase-based installations also represent a tangible connection to the artist's homeland and a sense of identity in relation to contemporary Cuban social realities.

The value of these installations is the way Ramos implies the multi-faceted destiny of her nation, as these objects provide a truthful collection of stories and anecdotes about emigration and the plight of the *balseros*.[485] Rather than representing a glorification of attempts to leave Cuba by such means, Ramos' pieces vividly conjure up the perils associated with such journeys. These installations capture the sense of individual lives affected by this ordeal, through the incorporation of peoples' private possessions as well

[484] Ibid.
[485] Antonio Eligio Fernández, "Sandra Ramos," Catalogue (*New Art from Cuba*), (London: *n.p.*, 1995).

as imagery associated with the ocean and the struggle to cross it.

The trunks and cases are transformed into powerful allegories to represent the spaces and places where Cubans load their worldly goods, longings and aspirations that their journey will lead to a paradise. These trunks and suitcases also represent Cuba's failure as a paradise or Utopia. Furthermore, the artist's formal use of the object most commonly associated with travel was ingenious, as it signifies the irony and frustrations of not being able to legally travel for the majority of Cubans.

The various sections of the *Inmersiones y Enterramientos* series explore representations of marginalised city culture in Havana through a range of mediums and objects, combining high art and quotidian practices. This series involves an existential enquiry into how Cuban people are searching for something, but what are they looking for? Through her use of video and installations these themes are vividly portrayed to show the desperate reality of poverty and the methods of escapism that many Cubans resort to. For instance, *Maquinaria para ahogar las penas* (*Machine for drowning sorrows*) (1999) **[Fig.59]** uses a beer pipe, alongside real images and sounds of the sea [see detail]. Ramos includes an actual beer pipe and hooks it realistically behind a metal container, to represent the tractors found in poor shantytown areas of Havana that sell beer very cheaply. Local Cubans go there to get drunk, have fun and to forget about their daily struggles.

The combination of the beer pipe and the video of the sea provide a powerful connection between emotional escape into drunkenness for those who remain in Cuba and a physical escape for those who leave via the sea — the *balseros*. Beer provides an

analogous liquid substance to the sea as a method of spiritually and physically evading everyday problems. Beer becomes a root or method through which it is possible to travel away from or outside of Cuban lived reality for a brief time, even though the traveler is always returned to exactly the same place.[486]

Word and Image

Ramos' interest in poetry and the use of the written word as a discursive form of expression has been explored in a number of her works, in which she utilises the potential of the written word to represent her identity as Cuban and as belonging to the Cuban soil. Her fondness for poetry as a form of cultural expression and discourse indicates her sense of being.

> "I like the way poets express things and I am interested in expressing things in a similar way. Although my work is sometimes very direct, it has other meanings and I think you can find that in poetry — underlying meanings".[487]

She often inscribes poetic texts within the space of the actual body if the artwork as well as in the titles, which amplify her moral messages. Such works can be considered as

> "Centres of disquiet between their sensuous and ideational elements: the works come forth from the tension between their manifestations as art objects and their manifestations as aesthetic ideas".[488]

The mutual influence between image and word in her works[489] often takes the form of line quotation and cliché. Figures.47/48 demonstrate this, as they reveal a hint of satire and neatly encapsulate some of the complexities of the individual's position in present

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[486] Menocal.
[487] Ramos interview, 26 February 2000.
[488] J. R Nicholas Davey, "Writing and the in-between". *Word & Image: A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* **16**, no, 4 (October–December 2000) : 378.
[489] Maggi, 212–213.

day Cuba. When the two prints in Figure.47 are viewed together the meaning of the words becomes "I am a mountain among mountains". In semantic terms, Ramos took these lines from one of Martí's poems that she considers a very beautiful poem and the sayings refer to many things: birth, nature, life, culture.[490] As previously discussed, the transformation of Ramos' actual body into a mountain and the island of Cuba can be read as visual metaphorical discourses about the artist's notions of personal and collective Cuban identity and consciousness. But in addition, the artist's visual imagery takes on a literal translation of Martí's text, which is already a metaphor within the original text.

Her utilisation of such textual discourses about Cuba as a place and a nation are markers of identity. This is evident in Figure.48, in which the combination of visual imagery with Piñera's discourse amplifies the artist's message. The depiction of Ramos' body as the island and the surrounding sea, with national symbols pinning down her body combine with the writing to connote a sense of pessimism about Cuban reality, in line with Piñera's work, and a lack of individual and/or collective freedoms in Cuba.

In addition to Martí and Piñera, other poets have been important in Ramos' formation as an artist and a human being. In particular Dulce María Loynaz (1902–1997) is a female Cuban poet she admires immensely, as well as the Argentinean poets, Alfonsina Storni (1892–1938), Alejandra Pizarnik (1936–1972) and American poet Anne Sexton (1928–1974).

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[490] These words form part of the second stanza of one of Martí's *Versos Sencillos*. "Yo vengo de todas partes, Y hacia todas partes voy: Arte soy entre las artes, En los montes, monte soy" (I come from everywhere, And to everywhere I'm bound: An art among the arts, A mountain among mountains). Foner, 58-59.

Dulce María Loynaz is considered as the 'Grande Dame of Cuban Letters,' yet despite her prominence as a poet her work was ignored and all but forgotten in Cuba for much of the last half of this century. She began producing poetry in the 1920s but this was followed by three decades of virtual silence from her after the 1959 Revolution. After the Revolution occurred, Loynaz refused to leave Cuba and her home, but she never wrote again and lived a life of solitude in Havana. Writing for Loynaz should aspire to say something new and her style was pared down, clean and concise with the emphasis on personal matters and the intimate secrets of the heart. However, her decidedly bourgeois background and origins and her personal style of poetry meant that Loynaz was not deemed as a suitable revolutionary poet during the early years of *el proceso.* So, she was sidelined and forgotten.

But Loynaz's status as a "living myth" for her solitary existence as well as her emphasis on personal themes and matters[491] fuelled the re-evaluation of her poetry that began in the 1980s. New publications of her work appeared in Cuba and she received national and international recognition in the form of the Cuban national prize for literature in 1987 and the prestigious Cervantes prize in 1992. In a similar manner, Virgilio Piñera's work was relatively unknown in Cuba when he died, despite the fact that he received the Casa de las Américas award in 1968 for one of his plays. He gained notoriety in Cuba for being openly homosexual and was imprisoned in the 1960s for being a pederast. This affected his life and his career, and up until his death he led a solitary, alienated and dejected life of poverty, sidelined by the Cuban literary world. He continued to write though and left a considerable body of unpublished work. As with Loynaz, Piñera's

[491] James Patrick O'Connor, *Absolute Solitude: The Prose Poems of Cuba's Dulce María Loynaz*, (accessed 30 June 2001) ; available from http://www.hws.edu/~SenecaReview/Loynaz9-8-2001.html ; Internet.

reevaluation as an artist in the 1980s led to his posthumous reappraisal as one of the greatest Cuban writers, along with Alejo Carpentier (1904–1980) and José Lezama Lima (1910–1976).

Among generations of Cuban artists since the 1980s, Piñera and Loynaz have been admired for their impressive creative talents but also for their alienation, strength of character and determination to follow their own path in the face of adversity. Piñera's persecution for his homosexual lifestyle and Loynaz's defiant stance not to leave Cuba in the 1960s, unlike the great majority of Cubans from similar upper middle class backgrounds, were viewed in a very different light by the 1980s and the new artistic generations that began to emerge. The reevaluation of cultural matters that took place in the '80s decade led many artists to reexamine the work of previously neglected Cuban artists in their own projects of exploring notions of Cuban identity.

However, Ramos' fascination with Loynaz and Piñera has extended beyond just a generational artistic concern with these poets' work. As well as their work as poets, it is the people they were and the themes they addressed that seem to have influenced Ramos. Piñera's tortured life was undoubtedly an important factor in his pessimistic visions of Cuba's (and his own) insularity, and, Loynaz's emphasis on personal matters and her solitary lifestyle are common threads that link her to Ramos' life and creative experiences.

Ramos' interest in poets and poetry does not concern the technical aspects of their respective poetry corpuses or the specific literary canons their work can be associated with, but to the people that they were and the themes they chose to focus on through

their poetry. The poets discussed in this paper were all pessimistic, solitary, socially defiant creatures who were sidelined and marginalised either professionally and/or personally throughout their lives. Many of these poets based their work on very personal themes and all had an innate sense of melancholy and solitude, like Ramos has.

Moreover, Sexton, Storni and Pizarnik were all female poets who challenged conventional perceptions of what were 'acceptable' topics for poetry (and for women to discuss) within the social and cultural boundaries in which they lived and worked. These three women also all suffered from bouts of mental illness and depression. Moreover, all committed suicide whilst still relatively young, albeit for different reasons and by different methods.

Despite being a highly acclaimed poet, winning a Pulitzer Prize for literature in 1967 as well as other prestigious awards, Anne Sexton led an emotional and traumatic life in the U.S. that included nervous breakdowns and many bouts of psychotherapy. There are similarities between Ramos and Sexton in their artistic approach to their topics. Sexton is considered the first female "confessional" poet. This term was probably coined in the late 1960s to refer to a specific movement in mid-century poetry in which the use of the first person singular is meant to point to the poet him/herself and to intimate and personal themes.[492]

[492] J. D. McClatchy, ed., *Anne Sexton — The Artist and Her Critics*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 34.

This form of poetry has also been described as,

"Autobiographical — associated with a certain purgation, and sometimes classified as therapy".[493]

In line with the confessional mode, Sexton's subjects and themes related to her biographical data, as she believed that the most interesting poetry was written out of personal experience. Her poetry was a journey and a vehicle for her to explore existential possibilities and psychiatrists encouraged her to write poetry as a therapeutic device to reveal her suffering from painful sections of her life.[494] This links with Ramos' own work and life experiences. The artist's *Manera de matar los soledades* (1993) print series deals explicitly with the traumas that she and the Cuban nation in general had to endure during the early 1990s. As the title implies, the eighteen sombre and pessimistic prints that make up this series explore the artists' feelings of sadness, loss and hopelessness. During this time the Cuban people encountered many everyday hardships and ideological and political problems as an inevitable part of their reality.

Yet from an artistic and creative viewpoint, this predicament led Ramos to produce art through which she attempted to find her own self within that chaotic and confused situation. Her artistic endeavours have functioned as a defence mechanism in order for her to deal with the traumatic events that occur around her. For her making art is a method of communication with herself, a kind of therapy in which she expresses herself in order to know herself better and to communicate with others and the future.[495]

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[493] William Packard, "Craft Interview with Anne Sexton," *Anne Sexton — The Artist and Her Critics*, ed. J. D. McClatchy (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978), 46.
[494] McClatchy, 117, quoting James Dickey.
[495] Ramos interview, 12 February 2000.

In the *Manera* series, Ramos contemplated the past, the future and all the change and uncertainty that was occurring around her during the early 1990s. She drew on her own experiences to document the trauma, hardships and turmoil the country was experiencing and how it affected her. The prints from the *Manera* series display the artist's use of visual and verbal intertextuality to try to encapsulate this. Consequently, some of the images from this series are disturbing and pessimistic and involve thoughts and images of death and mutilation, such as *Mi diaria de vocación suicida* (*My daily vocation of suicide*) (1993) **[Fig.60]**. The notion of suicide is explicitly stated in the title and the iconography depicts the Alice/Sandra/Queen figure being mutilated or destroyed by being rolled through a device to flatten and distort her into a copy of the Cuban flag.

The work can be read as meaning that the situation in Cuba at the time was intolerable and Ramos felt painfully restricted by the authorities and their actions. Official governmental hype stated that those on island would not see the people who were choosing to leave ever again. For Ramos, this was tortuous, as she is a person who greatly enjoys being surrounded by her family friends and she found the exodus of many loved ones very hard to cope with. *Quizás hasta debe partirme en dos* (*Perhaps I must split myself in two*) (1993) **[Fig.61]** also embodies the feeling common among Cuban people that their lives had been pulled apart, whether they stayed or left Cuba. Another print dealt with the artist's situation on a very personal level. *Alejandro* (1993) **[Fig.62]** is a portrait of her husband at the time, who had chosen to leave in 1992, whilst Ramos decided to stay. In this piece, the facial features of the protagonist are deliberately obscured, to indicate his exit from the country and the fact that the artist would have to try to forget him. The torn/missing section of the print featuring Alejandro's eyes formally

reiterates how according to the Cuban authorities, he would become a non-person once he left.

Ramos, like Sexton has a melancholic character and uses her art creations, such as *Manera*, as therapeutic ways to deal with the emotional, cultural and social traumas she has encountered in her life. Both of these women's corpuses are intense, personal, honest and direct expressions of their reality and evoke their life's events. In the case of Sexton: painful family and childhood memories, motherhood and womanhood, guilt, loss, mental illness, hospitalisation and death.[496] This poet described her first published volume of poetry *To Bedlam and Part Way Back* (1960) as about the experience of madness, whilst she discussed her second volume, *All My Pretty Ones* (1962) as concerned with the causes of madness.[497] Both volumes reflect her suffering, her psychological difficulty and emotional upheaval at this time, involving the deaths of many loved ones and personal illness. Therefore, an immense sense of sadness and loss pervades these volumes and is closely tied to the theme of memory and dealing with feelings of fear, guilt and loss. These same themes recur in later volumes, such as *Live or Die* (1966) *Transformations* (1971) and *The Death Notebooks* (1975), but new ones also emerge that relate to other life experiences: sex, love, suicide, menstruation and the endurance to somehow survive.

Like Sexton, Alejandra Pizarnik's poetry is associated with the confessional mode, and reading her writings has been described as a "moving and often painful experience".[498]

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[496] Caroline King Barnard Hall, *Anne Sexton*, (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1989), 1.
[497] Ibid., 32, quoting "Interview with Barbara Kevles" in *No Evil Star; Selected Essays, Interviews and Prose*, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1985), 94.
[498] Susan Bassnett, "Blood and Mirrors: Imagery of Violence in the Writings of Alejandra Pizarnik," in *Latin American Women's Writing: Feminist Readings in Theory and Crisis*, eds. Anny Brooksbank Jones and Catherine Davies, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 144.

Her work is full of intense emotion, often dark and sombre, dealing with death, madness, loss, solitude, nostalgia, homelessness, violence, violation, absence, the sea and silence. As with the other poets discussed in this paper, certain aspects of what is known about her life seem important for an understanding of her work. Born in Buenos Aires into a family of Russian-immigrant Jews, her origins led to her marginalisation, as well as being a female poet, a lesbian and a clinically certified schizophrenic who committed suicide in a country where suicide is still a capital offence.[499] She has emerged in recent years as a crucial figure in contemporary Latin American Feminist writing and one of the most important poets in modern Latin American literature. Yet, although she was recognised as an important writer in her lifetime, she remained socially marginalised.

It has been said that Pizarnik's poetry "appeals directly to the senses, like a painting"[500] as she utilises key powerful visual images to express her thoughts. Similarly, Ramos has uses key written sayings in combination with striking visual imagery to put across powerful ideas. Another connection between these women is that Pizarnik engages in many variations of wordplay such as punning and disassembling clichés, a trait Ramos also utilises. Pizarnik also writes in a very concise and brief form like Loynaz and Sexton, with a very condensed use of words. Reflexive self-questioning recurs throughout her poems and she portrays an "alienated poetic persona," similar to the image of the exile or expatriate.[501] Indeed, she writes about being on the edge and she

[499] David William Foster, "The Representation of the Body in the Poetry of Alejandra Pizarnik," *Hispanic Review*, vol. 62 (1994): 321, 333. Another pertinent factor to remember is that she grew up and wrote during the period when Argentina was under the control of the Peron military neo-fascist dictatorship (1940s–1960s).
[500] Carlota Caulfield, "Pizarnik, Alejandra," (accessed 23 January 2004) ; available from http://www.hope.edu/latinamerican/Pizarnik.htm ; Internet.
[501] Francisco Lasarte, "Alejandra Pizarnik and Poetic Exile," *Bulletin of Hispanic Studies*, vol. LXVII, no. 2 (April 1990): 71–72.

regarded herself as an outsider with the theme of cultural displacement as a central motif in her work.

Another valid point of continuity with Ramos is the world of childhood and being exiled or orphaned from it and Carroll's "Alice in Wonderland" childhood books were important literary sources for Pizarnik, as they have been for Ramos.[502] In *Infancia*, Pizarnik refers directly to Carroll's protagonist Alice, but while Alice enters an alternative magical realm after falling down a rabbit hole or climbing through a mirror, Pizarnik's character enters into death or nothingness.

"Hora en que la yerba crece
en la memoria del caballo.
El viento pronuncia discursos ingenuos
en honor de las lilas,
y alguien entra en la muerte
con los ojos abiertos
como Alicia en el país de lo ya visto".[503]

This childhood scenario is a familiar one in Pizarnik's poems, but she never projects childhood as a safe and happy time or place, but one of fear and the terrible dangers and angst of existence in the world.[504] By contrast, Ramos recalls pleasant childhood memories of reading stories about this character and she associates the image of Alice with a world of childhood dreams. However, she came to the realisation that people continue with their dreams in their adult lives, so the Alice figure became an effective symbol to connect the past and present. Ramos also found an analogy between the

[502] Fiona J. Mackintosh, *Childhood in the Works of Silvina Ocampo and Alejandra Pizarnik*, (accessed 23January 2004) ; available from http://www.boydell.co.uk/5060.HTM ; Internet.
[503] *Infancia* (*Childhood*) from *Los Trabajos y las noches* (*The works and the nights)* (1965) in *Alejandra Pizarnik: Obra Completa*, (Colombia: Editorial Árbol de Diana, 2000), 83. This poem translates as "The hour when grass grows in the memory of the horse. The wind delivers its simple speech in honour of the lilacs, and someone is introduced into death with eyes open like Alice in the land already seen".
[504] Bassnett, 132.

Alice character and her own feelings during the early 1990s, as like Alice, Ramos felt different to the world in which she lived and it seemed as if the world around her had become mad.[505]

The combination of the mixed female facial image — Sandra/Alice/Queen — and the written word allow Ramos to make a very personal connection with the figure of Alice, which both strengthens the self-referential character of her work and represents the collective memory of the Cuban people.[506] The mixed image female image Ramos employs could be read as a mask to deflect any possible official criticism or censorship away from her work and the themes she deals with, especially during the sensitive and difficult early 1990s in Cuba. This is supported by the fact that from the mid-1990s Ramos began to directly trace her own photographic image in her works. This could be attributed to her feeling more comfortable with depicting her own image vis-à-vis her artistic preoccupations, as a reflection of the changed parameters of Cuban society and art production.

Unlike Pizarnik, whose work is concerned with her own self and does not provide any insights into Argentinean life and society,[507] socially relevant topics are important for Ramos. For instance, *El sueño del profeta* (*The dream of the prophet*) (1993) **[Fig.63]** depicts the protagonist — Sandra/Alice/Queen — in her school uniform embracing a slightly caricatured representation of José Martí with the island of Cuba and its flag located behind them. The word and image components of the piece relate to the

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[505] Ramos interview, 26 February 2000.
[506] Ibid.
[507] Bassnett, 130.

continued ideological importance of Martí's ideas within Cuban consciousness, and in a personal sense for Ramos.

Post–1959 discourses are also an important part of Ramos' approach to draw on her country's rich cultural and social historical background and collective consciousness. *Seremos como el Che* (*We will be like Che*) (1993) **[Fig.64]** combines slogans and iconographical symbols associated with Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, with the Sandra/Alice/Queen bodily trace in a school uniform mouthing the words of the title. These words are chanted every morning by Cuban schoolchildren and reiterate the profound ideological influence Guevara has had on Cuba, as a fundamental discursive ideological orientation for succeeding generations of Cubans, like Ramos, born since the Revolution.

Ramos also combines word and image using Pizarnik's poetry to powerful effect in the catalogue for the *Inmersiones* series, to convey the sense of despair and hopelessness felt by Cubans. Pizarnik's poem, *La jaula* (*The Cage)* is overlaid on top of an image of the *Maquinaria para ahogar las penas* installation (Figure.59). This poem refers to the innate unhappiness Pizarnik feels and her suicidal thoughts. She sees other people enjoying life's simple pleasures but cannot appreciate life and its beauty because of her torments. The *Inmersiones* series expresses similar sentiments, documenting how Cuban people fail to appreciate the simple, good things about life because they are depressed, yearning for something else or trying to survive their environment by whatever means they can.

Afuera hay sol
No es más que un sol
Pero los hombres lo miran
Y después cantan
Yo no se del sol
Yo sé la melodía del àngel
Y el sermón caliente
Del último viento
Sé gritar hasta el alba
Cuando la muerte se posa desnuda
En mi sombra
Yo lloro debajo de mi nombre
Yo agito pañuelos en la noche
Y barcos sedientos de realidad
Bailan conmigo
Yo oculto clavos
Para escarnecer a mis sueños enfermos
Afuera hay sol.
Yo me visto de cenizas.[508]

An image of the sea video/beer pipe from *Inmersiones* are displayed on the opposite page, with another Pizarnik verse entitled "*El Silencio: La única tentación y la más alta promesa*" (*Silence: The only temptation and the highest promise*), to further reaffirm the sense of desolation encapsulated in the installation. The gist of this verse is that writing poetry is therapeutic for Pizarnik, with the ability to exorcise and repair fundamental wounds for the injured. With death restoring the enchanting prestige of silence.[509]

Pizarnik's fellow Argentinean Alfonsina Storni was also not a poet of joy and laughter and she poured out her torments and ideals through her poetry. Indeed, a constant theme in these three women's works is their yearning for life and death and their ambivalent state somewhere in-between. As a prolific poet, as well as a respected journalist, teacher and speaker, Storni described her eclectic approach as,

[508] This poem translates as "There is sun outside. It is nothing more than the sun, but men watch it and sing. I don't know the sun. I know the angel's melody and the warm sermon of the last wind. To shout until dawn when death rests bare in my shadow. I cry out my name. At night I wave handkerchiefs and eager ships of reality dance with me. I have hidden spikes to mock my sick dreams. Outside there is sun. I see my ashes/mortal remains".

[509] "Entre otras cosas, escribo para que no suceda lo que temo, se ha dicho que el poeta es el gran terapeuta. En ese sentido el que hacer poético implicaría exorcizar, conjurar y además reparar. Escribir un poema es reparar herida fundamental. Porque todos estamos heridos. La muerte ha restituido al silencio su prestigio hechizante".

"an attempt to mix art and life, and to learn to scorn death while still of sound mind, body, and spirit".[510]

This attempt to combine art and life may account for why Storni has been labelled as the most intellectual, the most objective and the most social-minded of the Modernist Spanish American poets, as her poetry frequently transcends personal bounds to become almost social in character.[511] She was gifted, professionally ambitious and socially defiant, with rebellious and unconventional behaviour and attitudes. However, she was limited by her social origins, which were, like Pizarnik's modest European immigrant beginnings.

Storni sought never to compromise the truth as she saw it, which caused her many difficulties and much suffering throughout her life. Just as Sexton put forth an uncompromisingly feminine and personal perspective, so did Storni, but from a very different social and cultural position and epoch. It has been said that Sexton's writing and poetry challenged accepted notions of gender, social role and female life in mid-century U.S..[512] Storni also championed female themes and social reforms in her writings, commenting especially on the social and legal injustices that have been the woman's lot since time immemorial.[513] She wrote about love, marriage, motherhood, illegitimacy and women's rights, and as such, she was ahead of her time.[514]

Her writings cast light on the cultural and social milieu of her time and the tensions that women faced in the midst of a rapidly changing Argentinean society. These were

[510] Sonia Jones, *Alfonsina Storni*, (Boston, MA: Twayne Publishers, 1979), 53 quoting "Con Alfonsina Storni," interview published in *Myriam*, Buenos Aires (August 1919).
[511] Sidonia Carmen Rosenbaum, *Modern Women Poets of Spanish America*, (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1945), 226.
[512] Barnard Hall, 174.
[513] Rosenbaum, 224.
[514] Jones, 26–27.

themes particularly close to Storni's heart, as she had a much-loved son out of wedlock and went to great lengths to keep it secret, in order to protect her child and her married lover. But as an unwed mother she encountered legal and social restrictions, although she was able through her professional activities to move into the growing middle class sector.[515] She also felt a certain sense of pride in her solitary struggle against society, as evident from the opening quatrain from one of her early poems, *La loba* (*She-wolf*).

Yo soy como la loba.
Quebré con el rebaño
y me fui a la montaña
fatigada del llamo.[516]

Early criticism of Storni, as with Sexton's creative production, centered on her perceived failure as a poet because she was unable to transcend her own problems, in personal poetry based on her life experiences and observations. The hostile patriarchal Argentinean social environment in which she lived also created many obstacles for her as a courageous, intellectual and spirited woman writing about controversial themes.[517] Her early volumes, *El dulce daño* (*Sweet Pain*) (1918) and *Languidez* (*Langour*) (1920) focus on the hope, pleasure, suffering and disillusionment of passionate love and the desire to renunciate such passion. However, as she grew as a human being in a spiritual sense her poetry became more objective, unusual and abstract. She often meditated on death associating it with the sea, a place which for her expressed notions of liberation and space.[518]

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[515] Ibid., 95, 117.
[516] These lines are the opening verse of *La loba* in *La Inquietud del rosal* (*Disquietude of the Rosebush*) (Buenos Aires: La Facultad, 1916), 59-60. These lines translate as "I am like a she-wolf. I broke away from the pack and went to the mountains for I was tired of the plains".
[517] Jones, 22–23.
[518] Rosenbaum, 215. Later works include *Mundo de siete pozos (World of Seven Wells)* (1934).

The sea has become a pivotal topic for Ramos since the mid-1990s, as well as notions of death and escape, highlighting thematic links to Storni as well as to Pizarnik. There are also similarities between Ramos and Storni's focus on reflections of the spirit of the times and a concern for social issues. As such, both women have produced forceful and poignant interpretations of modern city-life portraying a loneliness of spirit.

Criaturas de isla (Figure.56) is an example from Ramos that effectively combines word and image to connote the harsh realities of Cuban life in the present era. The artist inserts specific words found in ex-voto religious paintings, "to live deceived," above certain figures in the suitcases. The result is to suggest that the *balseros* are either swimming an ill-fated journey, or attempting to escape from an ill-fated existence, or perhaps both. The combination of the religious words, visual images and aesthetic objects serve to reinforce the powerful message(s) Ramos wants to convey.

Ramos' visual and textual focus on existential angst, solitude and melancholy are traits that have run through her life, reflecting her particular interest in the poets documented in this paper. She utilises the underlying and expressive qualities of poetry as well as the combination of word and image to explore and represent the dimensions of her thoughts and feelings about events that affect Cuba and its people. Like the poets discussed in this study, she draws on her personal torments and experiences in her creative discourses. Furthermore, as a successful, professional artist she is well placed to be able to comment on what she sees, hears and feels all around her and feels compelled to do so and she knows this is not something that other Cubans are able to do.

Visual Narratives

It is apparent through Ramos' art production that she is very aware and concerned with the current situation facing Cuba and she utilises visual narratives to explore these issues. The static monoscenic narrative in *Mi diaria de vocación suicida* (Figure.60) centres on the single act of Sandra/Alice/Queen figure's compression through a pressing machine. The implication of the visual narrative is that the artist feels trapped and unhappy with the situation in Cuba and her life is compromised by the situation Cuba finds itself in. By contrast, an active monoscenic mode in *Quizás hasta debe partirme en dos* (Figure.61) introduces the viewer to a theme of actions through the visual device of dividing the composition into three parts that are linked together by the single figure of the protagonist. The structure and iconography of the visual narrative indicate the difficult decision the artist must make. What should she do? Should she stay or leave Cuba?

On the left side of Figure.61, a typical Havana street is portrayed, complete with *jinetera*, and the right side depicts a plane flying away from the island of Cuba and the tears caused by such an action. In the central section, directly above female figure's split head a portrait of a young Martí is visible. This indicates his importance in Cuba and the artist's sense of Cubanness and the values and beliefs that are important to her. The chronotopes of the threshold and biographical time apply to both these prints, as they are concerned with the recent era of Cuba's socio-political history woven together with the artist's personal story and a crisis stage in her life, when she had to make some difficult life decisions.

Seremos como el Che (Figure.64) also employs an active monoscenic narrative mode. It introduces the ideas set out by Guevara and connotes a sense of historical and ideological continuity between recent developments in Cuba's history and the practices and beliefs that Ramos' generation was raised with. The chronotope of biographical time is apparent in this print, flowing smoothly into the space of the work, weaving historical and socio-public events together with Ramos' personal story.

The conflated mode applies to Figures.49-52. Multiple historical episodes are present in these works but their temporal sequence is not communicated and there is no formal order of presentation with regard to causality or temporality. Also, the figure of the protagonist is conflated instead of repeated from episode to episode in these pieces.[519] The chronotope of biographical time blends events in 1990s Cuba with the artist's own experiences, combined with the word and image associations to suggest Cuba's neo-colonial status and the problems that have come with it.

Tania Bruguera

For Tania Bruguera, as for Sandra Ramos and Belkis Ayón, the double emplacement of the female body has not been a topic present in her art production. Afro-Cuban religious themes have also not informed her work, although the idea of ritual has been an important element in her creative endeavours since her student days. The work, life and ideologies of seminal Cuban-American artist, Ana Mendieta (1948–1985) have also been instrumental in the trajectory Bruguera's art has taken.[520] Like Mendieta, Bruguera

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[519] Dehejia, 25.

[520] Ana Mendieta married U.S. sculptor, Carl André in 1985 but died tragically later that year in New York City. André was tried and acquitted of her murder in 1988; however, controversy remains around her death.

has utilised her own body and rituality as starting points in the development of her art creations.[521]

Mendieta was an important pedagogical influence on the *Volumen Uno* generation, providing an external sounding board for their work and ideas in the early 1980s.[522] As an artist based in the U.S., Mendieta was part of the contemporary art processes taking place in the western sphere. Her input was considered by the young Cuban artists to be very valuable, not least because it was difficult for them to obtain information about international art developments at that time. But her influence also extended to an ideological level as she incarnated the ideas they (*Volumen Uno*) had about what an artist should be; rigorous, serious, informed and critical.[523]

Bruguera has been the only contemporary Cuban artist to consciously concentrate on trying to recreate in the spirit of Mendieta. She recalls what a huge shock it was to discover at a lecture given by Gerardo Mosquera in 1986 that Mendieta was dead, as she had hoped that one day the Cuban émigré would return to Cuba and they would be able to meet. She was deeply affected by Mendieta's death, because Mendieta had been a young and powerful artist, but also because Bruguera would have liked to have known her on a personal and spiritual level.[524] Therefore, a way to know Mendieta for Bruguera was through Mendieta's oeuvre. Her aim was to try to rescue the work of this Cuban-American, who was not well known in Cuba, by giving form to the idea that

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[521] Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, "Maps of Desire: Contemporary Cuban Art," *Cuba — Maps of Desire,* ed. Gerald Matt, trans. Bernhard Höfele (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 153.

[522] Gerardo Mosquera, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, 26 February 2000. According to Mosquera, Mendieta's pro-Castro stance in the U.S. undoubtedly affected her reception in Cuba. Yet even in the present time the Cuban establishment has a fairly indifferent attitude toward her; she is not considered as a particularly important artist and was always an uncomfortable figure for officialdom. It is telling that the sculptures she made in Jaruco Park in the 1980s have been totally abandoned, with no official attempt to organise and make it possible for people to go and see them.

[523] Flavio Garciandia, interview by author, tape recording, Monterrey, Mexico, 3 March 2000.

[524] Tania Bruguera, interview by author, tape recording, New York, 9 December 1999.

Mendieta had returned to her native Cuba to continue her work. In this task, Bruguera undertook serious research with people who had known Mendieta.

In the period since then Bruguera's art has been a sphere where personal memories (hers and Mendieta's) have been interwoven with Cuban social, political and cultural circumstances and processes. However, I agree with Cuban art historian Eugenio Valdés Figueroa's hypothesis that in Bruguera's aesthetics we are dealing with a "spiritual split" rather than an appropriation of Mendieta's work.[525] Bruguera views her recreation of Mendieta's work as an intersection between their work; Ana was interested in rescuing the idea of Cuba from outside the country and Bruguera has been interested in rescuing the idea of Cuba that was abroad.[526]

In formal and ideological ways Mendieta provided Bruguera with a link from which to consider her identity, which at the same time enabled Bruguera to relocate Mendieta within a Cuban cultural context and Cuban history. In the beginning Bruguera appropriated Mendieta's language but moved progressively toward making pieces as if they were collaborative endeavours between herself and the Cuban émigré. A good example is one of Bruguera's earliest pieces, which was a recreation of Mendieta's work **[Fig.65/65a]**.

Mendieta also functioned as a metaphor in Bruguera's mind for all the things that began to occur in Cuba during the turbulent early 1990s. The Cuban émigré symbolises a

[525] Valdés Figueroa, "Maps of Desire" 156.
[526] Octavio Zaya, "Tania Bruguera in conversation with Octavio Zaya," *Cuba — Maps of Desire*, ed. Gerald Matt, trans. Achy Obejas (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 253–255. As a Cuban émigré, Mendieta was pro-dialogue between Cuba and the U.S. She became known for this in and outside of Cuba and for the first time since the Revolution people started going to Cuba from the U.S in the 1980s.

process of understanding those Cubans who have left Cuba, a process Bruguera found herself living through in the early 1990s.[527] Some inverted parallels can also be drawn between the trajectory of Tania Bruguera's life and that of Ana Mendieta, which can partly account for the connection Bruguera feels toward Mendieta. Bruguera was eleven when she returned to Cuba with her parents, whilst Mendieta was about the same age when she left Cuba for the U.S.. This was a particularly traumatic period in both of their lives, a time that saw the break up of their respective families, albeit for very different reasons. As the child of divorced parents, Bruguera moved between them in Havana, with a mother who was critical of the revolutionary process and a father who was supportive of *el proceso*.[528] Mendieta was separated from both her parents for a few years after leaving and she spent time in an U.S. orphanage, before being reunited with some members of her family in the U.S..

Despite the association in the U.S. between Mendieta and Feminist ideas, Bruguera's interest in Mendieta was shaped by her personal life experiences and the particular time period in which she began producing art, rather than from any U.S.-derived Feminist associations. Feminism has never been an idea that Bruguera has wanted to work with, despite her artistic and ideological connections to Mendieta, a figure that became a Feminist icon in the U.S.. From Bruguera's perspective as a contemporary Cuban female artist who has recently studied in the U.S., she believes that there is a very genderised view in the U.S., which could be construed as a positive thing but is also an extra burden that people should not have to carry.[529]

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[527] Ibid.
[528] Bruguera interview.
[529] Ibid.

In terms of Cuban women's perception of Feminist ideals, Bruguera believes there is a misconception in Cuba about what this term actually embodies. A situation most probably compounded by the official line that there is no racial, social or gender discrimination in Cuba, and post–1959 education has developed so that students are not taught to think along the lines of man/woman, black/white.

"We have this idea that there is no race or female discrimination in Cuba, which is not true".[530]

In addition to her interest in Mendieta, Elso Padilla and his artistic process fascinated Bruguera. Like many of his 1980s Cuban colleagues, Elso was artistically and intellectually preoccupied with issues concerning colonialisation, Amerindian cultures and Afro-Cuban religious and ritual traditions, socialist ethics and the ideas of seminal Latin American thinkers such as Simon Bolívar and José Martí **[Fig.66]**.[531] His personal and artistic process was a search for a "Latin American spirituality," and his art formed part of his personal holistic process of understanding the world and his place within it.[532] This process was more important to him than any finished art product and this approach shaped his attitude toward his entire life.[533] Bruguera took this notion from him as well as his very thorough approach to research.

In a profound sense Elso was a practitioner of Afro-Cuban religions through the plastic arts, even though he was not a real life religious practitioner. His awareness of being part of a complex socio-political, religious and mystical web meant that he included

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[530] Ibid.
[531] Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba*, (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1994), 50-57. The three-quarter-size effigy of Martí — Por América (*For America*) — was built in the manner of colonial church saints and partly covered by red and green darts - signifying the blood drawn by aggression and the sprouts of fertile re-growth. Elso used *Santeria* rites to 'prepare' this sculpture, blending his own blood with the materials, adding potions and objects connected to him and his partner.
[532] Ibid., 50, quoting Elso Padilla.
[533] Ibid., 51.

quotidian spiritual and religious practices in his art production. For example, he incorporated *Santería* rites in his preparations for certain works including Figure.66, in addition to utilising bodily, natural and popular materials. He also found useful moral and ethical overlaps between the *Santería* experience and his socialist upbringing, in the sense that he viewed both as aiming toward the betterment of people.[534]

Ideological and artistic connections between Elso and Mendieta may help to account for the sense of affiliation that Bruguera felt toward Ana Mendieta and her decision to create in the spirit of Mendieta during the late 1980s. Aside from their contact via *Volumen Uno*, Mendieta like Elso was aware of belonging to a complex socio-cultural political web, and in her early pieces she drew on *Santería* ideas and concepts related to ritual. As a child she had been exposed to *Santería* concepts via the backdoor, i.e. not through her family connections, which were white, upper middle class and deeply Catholic, but through the family maids.[535] In the U.S., Mendieta drew upon her childhood memories in her bodily performances to make a connection based in ritual to her homeland and her sense of belonging and being in the world — her 1970s *Silueta* (*Silhouette*) series is an apt example.

In keeping with Mendieta and Elso's approach, Bruguera does not consider her art practices as religious activity, even though they do have spiritual and mystical dimensions. For her, to talk about religions is, to an extent, to talk about institutions and about what is regulated and what one must comply with. Whereas, she considers spirituality is something much more intrinsic and which relates to what is inside us as

[534] Ibid., 56.
[535] Gabriela Salgado, conversation with the author, London, September 1999.

humans and what makes us sensitive beings. For Bruguera the spiritual and the mystical is the ethical relationship that individuals have with something. This mysticism creates a certain free space in which to journey and ritual is the journey from religion to mysticism.[536]

Bruguera views mystical elements as organically integrated in Cuba, part of the *convivencia* of Cuban life, as she has grown up in a society where the ideological, the ritual and the mystical have been combined. Therefore it feels normal for her, part of her *Weltanschauung*, to integrate these elements within the space of her art production as a method of communication. For her, ritual is the basis for stability in every society as well as an element that works within art. Through ritual, as a set of activities encoded in practice, one can enact social relationships and highlight how a particular society might function.[537] Furthermore, her views about organised religion and mysticism reflect her socialist upbringing and her 'Cubanness'.

> "I grew up in a society where the ideological and the mystical are combined. I live within a Revolution that has always been very conscious of how to use metaphor and the force of ritual in its activities".[538]

Bruguera may have developed the connection between the art performance and ritual practice via her ISA teacher, Magdalena Campos-Pons, who has also explored this relationship in her art production, as well as from Elso. Bruguera's self-perception and her artistic influences have made her feel torn between the 1980 and 1990 epochs.

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[536] Zaya, 253.
[537] Ibid., 255.
[538] Ibid.

"I consider that I started in the 1980s and lived through the 1990s, so I always think that I am in the middle of both. I like to do my work with a connection to the ambiences of the 1980s. I feel more connected to that, but at the same time I feel connected with some problematics to do with art in the 1990s — how to deal with the market and how to insert my work into international fields".[539]

Bruguera's work has been a process of trying to form a bridge between these two temporal and ideological generations following the schism in the Cuban art world and the departure of so many 1980s generation artists. Since the early 1990s, Bruguera has experimented with certain aspects developed during the 1980s concerning the social function of art production. She has reconstructed gestures, ethical and aesthetic principles and included her bodily traces in her artistic process. She has drawn upon ritual, Afro-Cuban and Latin American beliefs and traditions as unifying elements within Cuban society to consider notions of national identity and Cubanness from an historical and contemporary perspective. For her, this has been a way to make a political comment about the freedoms of the Cuban people and how living in that environment has affected Cuban people.

"Art is a testimony of what happens around you. If you decide to stay, what happens to you?"[540]

Estadística (*Statistic*) (1992) **[Fig.67]** is a piece that deals with this subject and contains such a fusion of elements. It is a funereal flag made from human hair that forms part of her *Memoria de la Postguerra* (*Memory of the Postwar*) series. It reflects the artist's concern with what was happening in Cuba in the early 1990s and how the people were marked by it. The body of the artist is not directly involved in the actual piece, but human hair, as a bodily trace, is an integral component to include real Cubans in a work that addresses issues that concern the entire population. The hair used in this piece

[539] Bruguera interview.
[540] Ibid.

was gathered from many anonymous Cubans, male and female, which the artist rolled, tied and sewed onto a cloth support in her apartment, accompanied by various friends who visited her during that time.

In Afro-Cuban religious beliefs, hair is one of the parts of the living body most often used to control somebody's mind, thoughts and decisions, and there is also a Latin American association with human hair as a metaphor for identity and willpower.[541] Bruguera combines these different symbolic associations in *Estadística* to suggest the mixture of Latin American and African-derived traditions entwined in the Cuban context. This piece also makes formal, iconographical and iconological reference to the Cuban flag by using colours that substitute the colours of the real flag. As the symbol of revolutionary ideas, the Cuban flag has connotations of striving for independence attached to it and flags are also flown outside Cuban homes after a death has occurred. The artist's use of the Cuban flag thus functions as a symbol of Cuba's national identity and as a metaphor to signify the mourning that all Cubans felt as a result of the events taking place in the 1990s.

Moreover, the notion of tying the string around hair strands relates to the ties that bind the Cuban people to each other. Bruguera likens the entire process involved in this project — gathering, rolling and tying the hair and sewing it into a flag with friends — with the communal activities of women during colonial and revolutionary times, when everyone had to pull together. Including friends and family in the act of making of the flag also means that those people become part of the work as well as those who

[541] Gerald Matt (ed.), "Beyond Time," *Cuba — Maps of Desire*, trans. Lisa Rosenblatt, (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 38.

donated hair.[542] Therefore, in a phenomenal as well as an iconographical and iconological sense, *Estadística* really does represent Cuba.

Continuing with the *Memoria* series but not utilising bodily traces, Bruguera's *Memoria de la Postguerra* newspaper editions use a standard newspaper format as their artistic space (1993, 1994) **[Fig.68]**.[543] The newspaper's format toys with the idea of being a real space and place for discussion about events in Cuba's social and art community. The themes for the first two issues reflect the sense of angst prevalent in Cuba during the early 1990s. Bruguera uses the term "*Postguerra*" (*Postwar)* as a metaphor for the conditions the Cuban art community experienced following the departure of the 1980s art generations and the continuing emigration since then. Indeed, notions of leaving and the growing Diaspora still remain very much in the forefront of lived realities on island.

In conceptual and spatial senses, the *Memoria* editions are located somewhere between an alternative art journal and an anti-establishment newspaper, but they utilise a traditional journalistic newspaper format with various sections: editorials, classifieds, anniversaries, health, culture, music, poetry, theatre, history and patriotism, architecture, news reports, foreign correspondence, advertisements and cartoons.

There are some very good texts in the editions and many of the article titles highlight issues that preoccupied Cuban artists and intellectuals at that time, with the focus on ideas of surviving, nationality, collective belonging and emigration. These include "*Examen psiquiátrico de un artista en la postguerra*" (*Psychiatric examination of a*

[542] Zaya, 241–245.
[543] There were two editions; the first in November 1993 and the second in June 1994. Bruguera distributed 500 samples of each edition to members of the Cuban art community.

postwar artist), "*Una mirada al nuevo arte Cubano*" (*A glance at the new Cuban art*), "*El pajaro del tiempo: Ajustense los cinturones*" (*A bird of the time: Belt adjusting*), "*De frente y luchando*" (*At the front and struggling*),[544] "*Caracas y la inutilidad de los mapas*" (*Caracas and the uselessness of maps*), "*Yo fui (feliz) en Cuba*" (*I was (happy) in Cuba*), "*Ubicuidad del limite*" (*The limits of ubiquity*), "*El emigrado de las isla*" (*The emigrant from the island*), and "*El Post-Exilo y la Post-Guerra*" (*Post-exile and Post-war*).[545]

There are also snippets of relevant information for the Cuban art world, such as "*Noticias del Aeropuerto*" (*News from the Airport*), about a working trip to the U.S. by Gerardo Mosquera and art historian Erena Hernández, who attended and participated in conferences and colloquiums in many cities. Upon their arrival back at Havana airport, a number of items were confiscated from them, which included art catalogues, press clippings and magazine articles, slides and a vodka brochure designed by 1980s Cuban artists who had relocated to the U.S., Tomás Esson, Arturo Cuenca and Florencio Gelabert. These artists were among those considered officially to be persona non grata by the early 1990s because they had decided to leave, and along with the rest of Mosquera and Hernández's materials they were deemed "*propaganda enemiga*" (*enemy propaganda*) by the Cuban authorities.[546]

Although Bruguera does not use the trace of her body in the *Memoria* newspapers, there are many images and bodily traces visible in them in the guise of cartoons, photographs, drawings and advertisements. For example, 1990s artist Carlos Garaicoa depicts a half-

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[544] *Memoria de la Postguerra*, November 1993, Issue 1. The authors responsible for these articles are respectively; Sandra Ceballos, Lupe Alvarez, Meira Marrero, Nelson Herrera Ysla.
[545] *Memoria de la Postguerra*, June 1994, Issue 2. The authors responsible for these articles are respectively; Abdel Hernández and Eric Splinter, Sandra Ceballos, José Luis Fariñas, José Ramón Alonso, Iván de la Nuez and Juan Pablo Ballester.
[546] *Memoria de la Postguerra*, Issue 1, 1, 6.

finished bridge between Florida and Cuba and the national stamp of Cuba is transformed into a phallic palm tree bearing the logo "*For Rent*" and marked as the copyright of "*El Macho Enterprise S.A*" [Fig.68a details I/VI].[547] There is also a photograph of a hand-held painted banner depicting a young José Martí [detail III] and a photograph by Manuel Piña showing the back of a young black male leaping out into a vast, empty seascape.[548]

Cuban Modernist and caricaturist Eduardo Abela's popular fictional character — *El bobo* — is also included. He is the chubby character dressed in black and white that Sandra Ramos employs in her iconography. Bruguera's inclusion of two cartoons dating from the 1930s featuring *El bobo* adds a dimension of popular cultural and artistic historical collective consciousness to the *Memoria* project. The sociopolitical climate of the late 1920s and early 1930s was largely unsettled,[549] and Abela utilised the cartoon format as a mass communicational tool within the national print media to comment on the situation through this character. Bruguera picks up on this trend and the two cartoons found in the first *Memoria* edition date reflect the sense of a society in transition and the upheaval and confusion felt during the 1990s, as had been the case in the early 1930s. Indeed, the comments and sentiments in the cartoons are very relevant and applicable to the contemporary situation in early 1990s Cuba.

One cartoon shows a group of *El bobo* figures sitting round a table deep in discussion and coming to the realisation that they are still missing an answer or solution to their

[547] Ibid., 17, 25.
[548] Ibid., 12, 22. Manuel Piña's photograph comes from his series *Aguas baldías (Water Wastelands)*, 1992—1994.
[549] Martínez, 365.

question or problem [detail IV].[550] The other image [detail V] depicts *El bobo* sitting on a wall next to the sea (probably the Malecón in Havana which faces northwards towards the Florida coastline) looking skyward at a group of planes flying low above him, whilst the caption states,

"Esto Marcha — ¡No hay duda que nuestro porvenir está en el aire!"[551]

The success of the first edition led to the second *Memoria* edition in 1994 being double the size of the first, resulting in many contributions of all kinds, including more images and a separate "Comics" section. The Comics sections includes cartoons such as Jorge Luis Marré's cartoon "*Where is Roy?*" signed "Marré and Lichtenstein" in the style of and in homage to 1960s U.S. Pop Art artist Roy Lichtenstein [detail VII].[552] Marré's cartoon copies Lichtenstein's legendary style by employing the imagery and layout of comic strips in his piece.

In addition to the contributions mentioned above, a substantial number of other Cuban artists produced texts and images for the *Memoria* editions, including Raúl Martínez, an established artist working since the 1950s/1960s, as well as important artists from the 1980s and some recently graduated or still studying. These include: Jacqueline Brito, José A. Toirac, Belkis Ayón, Sandra Ceballos, Aimée Garcia, Glexis Novoa, Lázaro Saavedra, Tanya Angulo, Douglas Pérez, Tania Bruguera, Ezequiel Suárez, Antonio Eligio Fernández (Tonel), Lázaro García, Kcho, Carlos Fuentes, Reinerio Tamayo and Alejandro López. There were many intellectuals, Cuban and non-Cuban, on and off

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[550] *Memoria de la Postguerra*, Issue 1, 8. Abela's Spanish text stated "¿Y allá queda alguien más...? Si, la solución... which translates as "And there is still something else...Yes, the solution..."
[551] Ibid., 6. This text translates as "This protest — There's no doubt that our future is in the air!"
[552] *Memoria de la Postguerra*, Issue 2, 27–28.

island that also collaborated on this project. Among these are: Elio Rodríguez, Lázara Castellanos, Saidel Brito, Rafael López Ramos, Coco Fusco, Rafael Blanco, Abelardo Mena, David Cordobés, Orlando Hernández, Féliz Suazo, Nelson Herrera Ysla, Hortensia Montero, Cuty, Grandel, Lupe Alvarez, Angel Alonso, Gerardo Mosquera, Ruth Behar, Luis Camnitzer, Janet Batet and Nilo Castillo.

The *Memoria* editions are considered a spearhead in Cuban art as they document the local art scene at the time and the increasing exodus of artists. They are especially pertinent because of the serious crises taking place in Cuban society at that time and the enforced restrictions on dialogue. The lack of spaces for critical discussion as well as the lack of art resources affected the scope for artistic production at this time. Furthermore, *Memoria* occurred when those Cubans who had chosen to leave the country were considered persona non grata in official terms, as demonstrated by the confiscation of certain items at the airport from Mosquera and Hernández. This government line led to a politically motivated enforced silence and the Cuban people were told to forget about those who had chosen to leave, as if they had died, as discussed in reference to Ramos' print series, *Manera de matar de soledades*.

Memoria sought to confront this issue by including on the first edition's back page a list of 106 Cuban artists who were currently residing outside Cuba. This list includes painters, sculptors, illustrators, graphic designers, silkscreen printers, engravers, photographers, critics, professors, performers, comedians, architects, cameramen, artisans and potters. Their disparate locations range from all over Europe, Central and

South America, to the Dominican Republic and the U.S., and represent the intense external artistic activity that characterises this period.[553]

This silence in the Cuban institutional atmosphere had been active since the end of the 1980s. An artistic rumour mill developed parallel to this silence, because, as Bruguera has pointed out, at times rumour has substituted all other media as a means of communication in Cuba.[554] Indeed, since the early 1990s artists remaining in the country have utilised two ways to work: rumour and metaphor.[555] Aligned to this idea, Bruguera's *Memoria* newspaper editions functioned like rumours and were distributed among members of the art community. They proved to be an effective method to legitimise the rumour mill, by opening up a forum for discussion among artists on topics that was relevant for all Cubans within the space of an officially recognised form of communication.

The dimensions of power and Cuban artists and the art sphere have increasingly preoccupied Bruguera, beginning with the *Memoria* editions, in which she questions the power inherent in being a professional artist on a number of levels. These editions are the artist's testimony about the relationship between artists and power within the Cuban art sphere during that period, as she felt that artists had become powerless and meek, like "conquered territories".[556] Controversially, *Memoria* states things that could not have been printed in the official newspaper or press. It also managed to successfully assemble ideas and help to maintain a sense of artistic adhesion at a time when there

[553] *Memoria de la Postguerra*, Issue 1, 12. The Spanish text stated "Memoria de la Postguerra patentiza la intensa actividad exterior de desarrollada por nuestros colegas en el último trienio (1990–1993). A continuación la situación actual según datos preliminares llegados a nuestra redacción hasta la fecha de cierre de la presente edición".
[554] Tania Bruguera, *Memoria de la Postguerra,* [Bruguera's website] ; accessed 27 September 1999 ; available from http://universes-in-universe.de/action/tania.htm ; Internet.
[555] Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, interview by the author, tape recording, Havana, 21 February 2000.
[556] Johannes Birringer, "Art in America (The Dream)," *Performance Research* 3, no. 1 (1998): 29.

was a chance that the Cuban art spectrum would lose the artistic and cultural connection of the previous decade.[557]

Bruguera's aimed with *Memoria* to produce an active social comment on the specific situation in which Cubans were living, through a range of viewpoints from visual artists, musicians, writers, filmmakers and poets. By doing so she hoped to gain a real insight into what was happening from various cultural points of view in a communal arts space, where artists could see what others were working on and what they thought about the same subjects.

> "My interest with [*Memoria*] is to produce a social comment on the specific situation we are living through in Cuba from the point of view of all the artists together, not only writers. That is the only way that you can have an idea, a real idea, of what is happening — through all of the points of view."[558]

Bruguera formally reiterates this point in the use of a quote from Edmundo Desnoes, the author of the groundbreaking and influential Cuban film *Memorias del subdesarrollo (Memories of Underdevelopment)* (1962), on the front cover of the first *Memoria* edition in November 1993 (Figure.68). The quote states the futility in attempting to discover any absolute notions of truth, but rather, to try to formulate points of view relevant to the Cuban situation, and from there to seek to impose one's own reality to the best of one's ability.[559]

As an ongoing collaborative project Bruguera's hope is to unite Cuban artists and intellectuals in the most general sense through this communal enterprise, as they are

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[557] Luis Camnitzer, "Memoria de la Postguerra," *Art Nexus*, no. 15 (1995): 30.
[558] Bruguera interview.
[559] *Memoria de la Postguerra*, Issue 1. "Dar con la verdad absoluta — si existe tal cosa — no resuelve nada, lo importante aquí es decidir nuestro punto de vista, descubrir dónde uno está parado, saber relacionar los cosas a nuestro alrededor en el mundo y desde ahí con todos los hierros imponer nuestra realidad".

now situated in disparate locations worldwide, dislocated from one another. There are similarities between her *Memoria* project and artistic developments during the Afro-Cuban movement, in terms of combining all of the arts in one textual space and the cultural dialogue between in the arts and cultural sphere in relation to the socio-political field. As primary communicative vehicles, the *Memoria* editions united Cuban intellectuals and artists from all the art disciplines, in and outside of Cuba. And, as with the Afro-Cuban movement earlier in the century, *Memoria* is concerned with pertinent political and social concerns regarding the ever-increasing Cuban Diaspora and the schism that has occurred in the visual arts sphere.

Like her contemporary Sandra Ramos, Bruguera explores her existential concerns based upon the effects of the instability and displacements that take place in contemporary Cuban life. For these artists working and living in Cuba in the 1990s, it is important for them to contemplate and document issues common to the Cuban people. Bruguera views her decision to stay in Cuba almost as a mission. She considers her role as an artist as a "cultural archaeologist," bringing to the collective memory something of the forgotten past as well as the lived present.[560] She conceives of all her projects as open-ended activities, in which she continues with projects over many years as evolving processes, using her position as an artist to look outside and to think about the situation in Cuba at the same time.[561]

Bruguera seeks to comment on Cuban reality as an active participant within it and the

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[560] Bruguera interview.

[561] A third edition of *Memoria* was due to take place in 2000 on the theme of "reconciliation" but to date this has not gone ahead due to other work commitments. This edition will maintain the newspaper concept as a logical format to capture a precise moment but will play with the very structure of the medium, as this edition will be a <<live>> newspaper and will be documented in photographs, video and on the Internet.

aim of her social commentaries is to make people think about the topics she deals with. According to her theorising, if artists become engaged in a monologue they become victims of their own work and begin to do illustration rather than their own work.[562] This artist's art production has always been a dialogue rather than merely art for art's sake. It is her testimony of what happens around her, which suggests a crucial social dimension to her artistic endeavours and her sense of responsibility as an artist. This intellectual dimension and social responsibility is very apparent with *Memoria*, as when the first issue came out in November 1993, it was a very difficult moment in Cuba. There were economic and existential crises, ideological tensions and increased artistic censorship. In addition, the general economic problems meant that only a couple of art magazines continued to be circulated — *Revolución y Cultura* and *Artecubano* — but their emphases were very official.

Therefore, there was a sort of inertia that affected the dynamic of the Cuban art sphere, and Bruguera created the *Memoria* newspapers to deal with that sense of inertia. She wanted to facilitate the unofficial circulation of ideas by addressing matters rarely debated in public from an alternative viewpoint to that of the official press, including the opinions of artists and intellectuals who had left Cuba. Her aim was not so much to express a counter-view but to present a range of viewpoints unavailable in any other Cuban communicative spaces at that time. Through the *Memoria* artistic spaces, the artist mobilised notions of collective belonging felt by Cuban artists and intellectuals. Moreover, as a decidedly utopian project, *Memoria* provides an eloquent account of the anxiety and frustration felt by Cuban intellectuals.[563]

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[562] Bruguera interview.
[563] Fernández, "Tania Bruguera".

These editions try to make sense of the broken lives of those on island and to encourage dialogue with the wider Cuban community, which feeds into a consideration of place and displace and how being Cuban does not solely relate to the country's geographical location. Bruguera has thought about how there are ways of being Cuban that transcend the island of Cuba. Her artistic approach has been to make the point that even if one does not live in Cuba, they can still be Cuban.

This idea harks back to Bruguera's fascination with Mendieta and the idea that an émigré artist like Mendieta continues to belong to a place long after he or she has left. Mendieta provided Bruguera with evidence of a section of Cuban society that Cubans on island did not know but that did exist, and this signified for her how the condition of being Cuban extended beyond geopolitical borders. This led her to contemplate through her art what it meant to be Cuban: to live in and belong to a country as a cultural entity, and to consider a country as a way of being.[564] In other words, Bruguera began to see being Cuban as further than the island itself as a physical place. Indeed, Mendieta embodies the idea that geographical territory does not define identity per se, and her artistic corpus represents the embodiment of displacement.

In her web proposal for this project she acknowledges that Cuban artists have become "islands," literally and metaphorically, so her purpose with this project was to establish a dialogue between them on and off island. This was quite a task to undertake. But the *Memoria* newspapers did function as a bridge between the 1980s and 1990s artistic generations and provide a communal space and context to allow dialogue between practitioners from all the arts. However, Bruguera's interest, which started out as a

[564] Birringer, 27.

personal one in the 1980s, became seen as political in the early 1990s as it was contrary to the official line.[565]

In her artistic process, the inclusion and trace of her body has often been paramount, and is essential to the use and function of certain works by her. A pertinent example is *El Peso de Culpa* (*The Burden/Weight of Guilt*) (1997) **[Fig.69]**, where the trace of her naked body is central to the performance. In addition, Bruguera has problems that she has to resolve about politics, how to behave and the contradictions she has felt since deciding to remain in Cuba.[566] These elements are all evident in Figure.69. There are political overtones to this piece that refer specifically to the historic collective suicides of the indigenous Cuban people during the Spanish colonial occupation, which the artist updates to its relevance to the Cuban present. A decapitated lamb hangs from Bruguera's neck while its head is placed on the floor in front of her. She occasionally lowers herself forward in reverence onto her knees and places her head on the floor close to the lamb's head. If viewed from the appropriate angle, the lamb's head appears to be the artist's own. In some performances she also washes her hands and body with the lamb's fat, and in others eats a mixture of earth mixed with salt water.

She envisions this performance work as an indicator of some ways to survive the contemporary Cuban environment and how to respond and resist to it.[567] It includes solemn ritualistic looking rhythmic movements that imply prayer and supplication, but at the same time these movements also suggest liberation and self-sacrifice. The lamb is a Christian iconographic symbol to suggest sacrifice and obedience and one that also

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[565] Bruguera interview.
[566] Ibid.
[567] Zaya, 245.

metaphorically represents guilt. At the same time, the lamb acts as a literal protective shield and because of the weight of holding an entire lamb it also functions as a symbol of submission. The action of washing one's hands is a universal symbol of not caring about anything, and by extending this symbolic act to include her entire body, Bruguera seeks to indicate that her whole self does not care and she is the sacrifice.

The earth and saltwater mixture stands as a symbol of tears and its presence and the action of eating it recall the actions of the indigenous Cubans. As, at the time of the Spanish invasion, the only way for indigenous people to rebel against the Spanish was to eat dirt until they died. This gesture seems hugely poetic to Bruguera and reminds her of Cuban individuality as a nation and as individuals. Moreover, the earth is a sacred symbol and one that denotes permanence, therefore eating dirt is like swallowing one's own heritage and a way to elect suicide. In a contemporary Cuban sense as well, to say someone is "eating dirt" is understood as meaning that they are going through a difficult time.[568]

Bruguera relates to the notion of acting in a submissive way as a survival mechanism. All the elements in Figure.69 — eating the lamb's fat and the earth/saltwater mixture combined with the lamb hung from her neck — inter-relate to demonstrate that passivity has been a way to survive the Cuban situation.[569] However, Bruguera views this solution itself imbued with guilt and burden resulting from passive complacency and forced complicity.

[568] Ibid.
[569] Ibid.

"I think being submissive, being compromised and showing no resistance is another way to die.[570]

On one level the socio-political dimensions of this work relate to Cuban peoples' submission and passiveness about what has happened within their society.[571] But this work also indicates how belonging to a particular locality evokes a notion of loyalty to a place that can be expressed through means that have relevance to understanding identity at both an individual and collective level.

In relation to Figure.69 and issues of identity, the universal spatial associations between the female form and Mother Earth tie in with pre-historic traditions and certain Feminist theories relating to female powers and deities. This relates to the use of Bruguera (and Mendieta's) own bodies and traces in their art production connected to the idea that their female bodies can contain and be synonymous with the land or *la tierra*. In some sense that their bodies can contain the idea of the (home) land or the island. Furthermore, according to phenomenological philosophical theorising, the Earth, in its deepest, most elemental truth, is the Being of beings. Being discloses itself to us as ground in relation to our embodiment, and the question of being can be understood in relation to our groundedness in the earth.[572] Carl Jung also commented on the relationship of the body to the earth in his discussion of the role of the unconscious, stating,

> "The soil of every country holds some mystery. We have an unconscious reflection of this in the psyche: Just as there is a relationship of mind to body, so there is a relationship of body to earth."[573]

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[570] Bruguera interview.
[571] Valdés Figueroa, "Maps of Desire," 157.
[572] Levin, David Michael, *The Body's Recollection of Being: Phenomenological Psychology and the Deconstruction of Nihilism*, (London and Boston: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1985), 284.
[573] Carl Jung," The Role of the Unconscious," *Civilisation in Transition* in "Collected Works" vol. 10 (Princeton: Princeton University Press, Bollingen Series XX, 1970): 13, quoted in Levin, 284.

In keeping with the artistic processes of Mendieta, Bruguera incorporates her (unclothed) body into her work as part of the ritual process. The female form was the primary focus of Mendieta's work and she sought to establish a connection between herself, Cuban culture, the earth and universal energy powers. In works such as her 1970s *Silueta* series of earth-body sculptures, Mendieta affected a virtual re-absorption of herself into the earth, as a means of affirming her identity. Likewise, *El Peso* presents Bruguera eating the earth in a bodily performance and ritual linked to complex socio-historical Cuban traditions that help to affirm her identity as Cuban.

Along with the artistic and philosophical influences of Elso and Mendieta, ISA professor Consuelo Castañeda was another important influence on Bruguera. Like Elso, conceptual artist Castañeda influenced the artist as she made her consider the relationship an artist can have with his or her historical past and the whole of art history. *El Peso* is a good example of this in its contemplation of contemporary life whilst remaining very conscious of the whole of Cuban cultural history and recycling various elements of it. Bruguera's aim is not merely to display the fusion between different cultures and epochs. She subsumes them in complex statements on the nature of human existence to say something specific about Cuba and the parallels evident in the country's history. Indeed for her, one could say that fusion and ritual are ways of transcending temporality, with her body central to this process.

These points have relevance for *Dédalo o el Imperio de Salvación* (*Daedalus or the Empire of Salvation*) (1996) **[Fig.70]**. The title of this series refers to the Greek myth of Daedalus, an Athenian architect and sculptor who built a famous labyrinth for Minos to confine the Minotaur. Daedalus was subsequently imprisoned by Minos, but escaped by

inventing wings for himself and his son Icarus, to fly across the sea.[574] This series involves awkward looking flying objects that, in conjunction with the symbolism of the Greek mythology, produce an analogous monument to the Cuban *balseros* who attempt to leave Cuba in makeshift rafts. Bruguera's creations appear as aesthetic objects when hung on a wall and they only become charged with function once they are put on. Thus they require a human body to operate them effectively, as without a person they do not make sense and their meaning is reduced. These flying machines also constitute a trap, because not only is it necessary for a person to endow the object with meaning but the way to operate the objects involves contorting oneself into abject positions or having to adopt certain postures. These positions include kneeling with one's hands pinioned behind one's back, or with a hand raised above one's head with a clenched fist; all movements that suggest compliance and submission in a physical sense (see Figure.70b).

These objects are Bruguera's comment on a nation consumed with leaving or fleeing Cuba, and/or have had to face the loss of friends and family members. The artist utilises the metaphor of the human involvement needed to make the flying objects work to consider some possible ways to leave or escape from Cuba without having to renounce it forever.[575] The polemics of the *Dédalo* series relate to how to manoeuvre strategically within the Cuban system. The implied political undertone is that by being quiet or submissive or by contorting oneself (or one's ideas) in some way will enable one to travel.[576] Moreover, the notion of flying has varied connotations attached to it in the Cuban context. It highlights the polarity between those Cubans with dollars that are able

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[574]Geddes & Grosset, *Classical Mythology,* (New Lanark, Scotland: Gresham Publishing, 1995), 352.
[575] Birringer, 28.
[576] Sarah Milroy, "The sly politics of Cuban art," *Globe and Mail* (Vancouver), 5 April 1997, sec. C5.

to afford to leave by air and those who do not have access to dollars and are unable to leave legally. For them, the idea of flying refers to the metaphorical activity of escapism via fleeing in one's dreams.

In contrast to the other artists in this study, Bruguera consciously analyses the special benefits and power she enjoys as a professional Cuban artist. It was *El Peso* that made her realise her privileged societal position and was a turning point in her career when she began to take on board the issues of guilt and responsibility.[577] She realised that visual artists are placed in very privileged positions within Cuban society. They are less repressed than ordinary Cubans and are able to comment on all types of things through their art that others around them are not able to do. Artists often complain and criticise their lives, but the fact they can do so and people listen, including those overseas, succinctly illustrates artists' privileged ability to express and be listened to.[578]

Aside from the possibilities inherent in the medium of the plastic arts, which will be further addressed in the following chapter, the travel opportunities and material benefits available to plastic artists exceed those available to their fellow citizens. As, travel is only a practical possibility for those with invitations from abroad and sufficient funds to do so. The ability to study and/or work extensively overseas has been important to Bruguera.

The opportunity for her to study in the U.S. at the prestigious Art Institute of Chicago in 1997 marked a new avenue in her creative explorations by giving her a chance to

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[577] Bruguera interview.
[578] Ibid.

develop and broaden her knowledge and interests. Her placement overseas enabled her to develop a cross-cultural perspective and discourse on issues that were already preoccupying her: issues of identity, emigration and displacement.[579] This was especially beneficial because as Bruguera has pointed out,

"America is a dream and a point of reference for everything in Cuba; daily life, politics and art".[580]

Her ensemble performance produced at the Art Institute, *Art in America* (*The Dream*) (1997) focuses on the notion of emigration. The unfamiliar reality of living in the U.S. had a profound effect on Bruguera and she became very sensitised to the issue of homelessness as a result of her own voluntary displacement. This in turn allowed her to experience how emigrants might feel when they are placed in a new context. In line with her phenomenological and research orientated artistic approach, Bruguera lived with members of the local Cuban community and spent many hours interacting with homeless people in their underground shelters. In her endeavour to define what the term 'home' meant, she made grammatical, phonetic and ideological connections between the terms "homeless" and "homeland" from the perspective of emigrants who speak another language. The artist realised that emigrants were placed in a very similar situation to transient homeless people, marginalised within society with no real space of their own.[581] Thus for her, the notion of homelessness became a useful and insightful metaphor to describe the collective Cuban experience and ethos of Cubans living on island and outside, in places like America.[582]

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[579] Art in General and the Bronx Council on the Arts (New York) brought a group of 1990s Cuban artists to work in residence at various art spaces in the USA as part of a cultural exchange programme. The goal of the hosts was to open up an alternative space for communication about cultures and identities from conflicted transnational perceptions.
[580] Betti-Sue Hertz, "1990's Art from Cuba. A National Residency and Exhibition Program". *CUBA* (Chicago: SAIC, 1997): 29.
[581] Birringer, 30.
[582] Bruguera interview.

In *Art in America*, Bruguera creates a metaphor for the fact that emigrants entering a new country have to try to forget their legitimised identity and mother tongue in order to enter a new situation, so a form of cultural erasure takes place. This act creates tension and disarrangement for emigrants and homeless people, in the sense that they both belong to delegitimised groups within society and they have to band together in order to preserve themselves.[583] The artist incorporates her physical self, the bodies of Cuban émigrés and the audience into her *Art in America* performances. The setting is a dark empty underground space and the first experience for the audience at the entrance is to give up their ID cards; a test to take away a form of identity. To add authenticity, actors who represent U.S. customs officials interrogate the audiences whilst the artist gives tarot card readings in hushed Spanish that are translated by a Cuban émigré.

As an artist, Bruguera hopes that the specificity of her life experiences can reflect something of the Cuban condition and humanity in general. Her artistic mission to extend and improve dialogue and communication between Cubans in disparate locations has been strengthened by her study opportunity in the U.S.. This lived and work experience has been very beneficial, as she has discovered that Cubans and their Cuban-American counterparts have much to learn from and give to one another. Furthermore, she has witnessed firsthand how both sides feel loss as a result of their recent history.[584]

Formal Devices

Bruguera's opportunity to study for a Master's degree in Chicago has given her access

[583] Birringer, 30.
[584] Bruguera interview.

to a whole range of new media to work with. Her artistic corpus is multi-disciplinary, including 2-D paintings, prints, sculptural objects, site-specific installations, video and live performance. The ability to study overseas and to learn about multi-media abroad is important because technology in Cuba has not kept up with developments in more advanced countries due to economic reasons. With this in mind, Bruguera's study opportunity in the U.S. enabled her to learn more about this field, and she intends to use this knowledge and experience back in Cuba.

"The idea that I came here with is to study because I want to open a department of performance in Havana...because I believe that performance is an interesting media to express yourself but difficult to continue with in Cuba".[585]

In her experience, the medium of installation can provide a great deal of creative freedom, but for her, live performance provides a more intense experience in the creation of a piece of work.

"I think I like it because of the experience, what I experience on the project. When you are doing performance, it is such a special moment when all the energies come together and you have this amazing energy."[586]

Bruguera is a unique figure in the contemporary Cuban art sphere. She tends to work predominantly with her own image and objects rather than other people in her artistic projects. This reflects her indebtedness to Mendieta's artistic process and her preference for performance as a method of art, dialogue and communication. Through her use of performance she has reclaimed an aesthetic that has been largely neglected by other artists. Many of her 1990s colleagues' artistic focus has been on producing saleable works for the art market, but Bruguera has a lack of interest in the international

[585] Ibid.
[586] Ibid.

art market. This combined with her penchant for showing her work in situations where people may not necessarily know about art suggests her social commitment and an anti-elitist approach to being an artist.

Her fidelity to her own needs and those of Cuba and its people, rather than to the needs of the international art market, exemplifies her as an example of the *Cuban hombre nuevo* set out by Guevara and the intended function of artistic practice he mapped out via Mariátegui. This is not to say that the other artists in this study do not embody ethical, social and moral dimensions to their artistic endeavours, they do. However, Bruguera's very specific approach and the techniques she employs deserve a special mention, as they have set her apart from her counterparts.

Her artistic focus on performance can be seen as a less passive way to engage with the audience and it has been an ideal medium for her. It has great impact and has allowed her greater access and engagement with the audience, so that her work has been able to more effectively function as part of a dialogic process. It is important for her to see people's phenomenal reactions to give her the opportunity to analyse her own work, as a learning process for herself. Bruguera's artistic objective is that, even for those who may not understand everything in her work, she would like them to leave an encounter with her art production with a desire to know more or, at the very least, with a certain emotional connection to the art. Through her success and increased travel opportunities, she increasingly seeks through her art to feel a universal, humanistic connection and sense of understanding with people, irrespective of historical, social, ideological and geopolitical issues.

The performative aspect of her work is evident in her contemplation on the theme of emigration in *Miedo* (*Fear*) (1994), produced for the Fifth Havana biennial **[Fig.71]**. This piece highlights her phenomenological approach as she lay in an unusable boat for a few hours to 'become' the boat and to physically embody the term *boat people* or *balseros*. Through the trace of her body, she literally puts herself in the place of the emigrant by situating herself in the physical site of the *balseros* and to experience the feeling of being in such a vehicle. This phenomenological approach is also apparent in *Dédalo o el Imperio de Salvación* (Figure.70), as the experience and action of actually wearing the flying objects is an essential part of the overall meaning of the pieces and necessary for them to work or be activated.

In complete contrast to the artist's other projects discussed in this thesis, the unique format of the *Memoria* newspaper editions deserve a special mention (Figure.68). Bruguera's rationale for creating these editions relates to her notion of the ethical role the plastic arts and artists can play within *el proceso*. As artistic endeavours, these unique spaces transcend some of the barriers between creative mediums and types of artists. They function as testimony as well as social commentary, putting forward the viewpoints of many Cubans, on and off island, in relation to issues that concern the entire nation. Furthermore, the *Memoria* newspapers reconnect the Cuban arts field in general and establish a dialogue between Cuban and non-Cuban intellectuals, on and off island.

Word and Image

The *Memoria* newspapers admirably demonstrate the perception that the arts are complementary to one another: painting explains the object in its luminous and

sensuous immediacy and language helps to articulate its deeper implications.[587] Despite their official looking format, the irony of Bruguera's *Memoria* issues is that the contributors consider them as anti-newspapers, in contrast to the lack of freedom of information and speech associated with the official Cuban press. Bruguera's utilisation of the newspaper format is ingenious because there are underlying associations that such a format will present truthful facts, as opposed to producing a work of mere aesthetic expression. By adopting a traditional format of news making, these editions become instruments through which serious socio-political comments are put forward, and at the same time these pieces also function as works of art.[588]

As truly innovative projects, the *Memoria* newspaper cross a boundary between visual and textual methods of discourse and in terms of the topics broached. Both copies include true stories by Cuban intellectuals of official harassment as well as news from émigré Cuban artists overseas. These subjects were deemed to be highly controversial in the early–mid 1990s and it is not surprising that they were officially censored. By establishing links between Cubans on and off island and by mentioning artists who had left Cuba, Bruguera disobeyed the Cuban government's dictates. Even their titles were controversial, indicating the artist's belief that the 1990s Cuban social and artistic world resembled "a landscape of trenches devastated by war, in which those who remained were exhausted, beaten and disillusioned". She had heard this described as a "postwar situation," which she considered applicable to the Cuban situation, except in Cuba it had been a "war of ideas" not of physical battles.[589]

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[587] David Scott, "*L'art verbal des poètes-peintres:* the text/image problem in the context of Blake's 'Infant Sorrow' as analysed by Roman Jakobson in *L'art verbal des poètes-peintres Blake, Rousseau et Klee*," *Word & Image. A Journal of Verbal/Visual Enquiry* 17, no. 3 (2001): 209.
[588] Valdés Figueroa interview.
[589] Zaya, 241.

By utilising a standard daily newspaper format, *Memorias*, complete with editorials, classifieds, overseas reporting, photos, cartoons, sketches, poems and articles offers a collection of disparate and contradictory voices that refuse to be constrained by the nature of the written medium in the Cuban context.[590] The use of such a traditional communicative medium and the editions' contents suggest the professionalism of the undertaking and the participation of an intellectual elite in this project, with a focus on the 'truthfulness' and the seriousness of the topics under discussion.

The sketches and advertisements contain multiple references and cleverly combined words and images to provide satirical commentaries on Cuba's specific socio-economic and political circumstances in the early 1990s. These aesthetic ideas have an element that is emotive and sense related and another that is conceptual, and the work is located in the tension between these polarities.[591] For instance, detail II in Figure.68a depicts a fake advert in the style of the well-known U.S. commercial brand, the "Camel Tobacco Company," which is loaded with irony and metaphors and there is a clever play on words and languages at work.

The Spanish term "*Camellos*" sounds and looks very similar to the English word "Camels". This double connection is implied visually by the inclusion of a camel, desert landscape and palm trees within the rectangular image. As well as the iconography, the writing style and layout of the advertisement closely copies the dimensions and style of an actual packet of Camel cigarettes. However, the term *Camellos* has a different meaning in Spanish: it means a joke, a hoax or a cock and bull story. Moreover, when

[590] Fernández, "Tania Bruguera".
[591] Ibid.

this word is read in relation to the rest of the text and in light of the particular imagery, a very different story emerges.

The written text translates as,

For want of / lack of bread
"Camellos" (Hoax/Joke)

Cuba Pavillion
Painting~Drawing~Sculpting~Photography

An oasis in the path of the necessity of the market

23 and M 8th May 6:00 P.M.
Patronage by the 80s S.A and A.H.S

Through a combination of word and image, detail II makes reference to Cuba's dire socio-economic situation and the transformation of the state apparatus from a centralised communist approach to a market economy. It also refers to the political and ideological developments that followed on from that process and the profound implications for Cuba and its people. This includes artists and the dynamic of the Cuban art scene. For artists living and working in Cuba during the 1990s (especially the generation of artists that began to graduate and work professionally from about 1993 onwards) there have not been adequate opportunities to support themselves by working only in Cuba. This has generated awareness in the plastic arts realm of the need to show work abroad and to get a market for it.[592] This is the lived reality for artists residing in Cuba since then.

Indeed, the 1990s witnessed the international commercialisation of Cuban art with

[592] Garcíandia interview.

increased opportunities for artists to sell and exhibit internationally and to travel more frequently and easily. This could be why this advert refers to the plastic arts sphere as a literal 'oasis' in the path of the Cuban market economy. The plastic arts field is one of few viable methods of earning hard currency and surviving the present-day Cuban environment. In fact, to a large extent, professional Cuban artists have become export products[593] compounded by the fact that plastic artists have been able to legally to earn U.S. dollars from the mid-1990s onwards.[594]

This image illustrates how parody and irony and the appropriation of images and quotations have been crucial components and essential strategies for the articulation of a critical stance in the 1990s. The use of the term "oasis" could also be read as a metaphor referring to the plastic arts spectrum as conscious and critical spaces from which to comment on Cuba's wider socio-political developments. The reference to the patronage of the 1980s could be read in relation to 'oasis', as an attempt to reconnect and pay homage to the 1980s artistic ethos, following the exodus of so many artists from that decade. And, the groundbreaking 1980s laid the artistic, educational and ideological foundations and legacy for future Cuban artists.

This image can also be viewed as an advertising space and a type of flyer to promote a forthcoming art exhibit in Havana, effectively detailing the address, time and date. The play on words/images indicates the consequence of the Cuban government's strategy to utilise art as a source for hard currency: the introduction of the commercial potential of Cuban art production, where "the exchange value is sought outside of national reality,

[593] Mosquera, "Contexts," 83.
[594] Michael Z Wise, "Tweaking the Beard of the Maximum Leader," *New York Times*, 12 June 1994, sec. H, p. 36.

which predetermines subject matter and language".[595]

The combination of text and image in Figure.68a detail I work in conjunction to reinforce the message the artist wants to get across. The image of an unfinished bridge on the very edge of Havana gives physical form to the idea of the complex and multifaceted reality of the relationship between Cuba and the U.S.. In a literal sense the word/image combination suggests the separation between Cuba and the U.S. and Cubans and Cuban-Americans, the island nature of Cuba, its isolation and the increasing exodus of Cubans out of Cuba, often to the U.S.. However, the ambiguousness surrounding the Spanish term "*los puentes*" adds another dimension to this piece. *Los puentes* can be translated as "bridges" but it can also mean "gaps". So, in addition to referring to the necessary physical bridges needed to cover the distance between these two countries, there are other connotations that refer to the meaning of *los puentes* as gaps.

The reality of the relationship between the U.S. and the island of Cuba is one in which substantial historical, political, ideological and social gaps exist and which require a joint effort to begin to rectify. This is implied through the style and layout of the piece and the word/image combination. The text is organised in a methodical and logical way, as if it were an engineering/architectural blueprint, setting out the purpose of the project, its location, materials needed and the joint responsibility of the U.S. and Cuba for carrying it out.[596] The sheer scale of this task is apparent in visual terms through the juxtaposition of the Havana landmark, Castillo del Morro and the people standing by the water's edge

[595] Osvaldo Sánchez, "The Last of the Moderns," Catalogue (*Cuba: La Isla Posible*), (Spain: Ediciones Destino, 1995), 251.

[596] The wording translates as "Project concerning the reality and the bridges/gaps (necessary project, aimed at Havana – 1993). Location: Havana Bay, Materials: Glass/concrete/wood, Realisation: Joint Cuba–U.S.

looking out onto the vast bridge construction that dwarfs everything else around it and continues off into the horizon.

Other techniques used in *Memoria* include the standard print advertising formula in the second edition, to advertise for the following *Memoria* installment [Figure.68a detail VIII],[597] which set out the project's aims. Bruguera also combines words and images in other works including *Miedo*, *El Peso de Culpa* and *Dédalo o el Imperio de Salvación* through their titles, along with objects and performances, to more fully encapsulate the spectrum and significance of the issues she wants to address.

Visual Narratives

Like her counterparts Campos-Pons and Ayón, Bruguera draws upon myths in some of her art endeavours and an historical dimension is evident in her mythic images in which she attempts to establish connections between present, past and future. However, all of these artists' works become devices not just to reproduce specific myths but to renovate them because of their unique interpretations of them. Bruguera's focus on the Greek myth of Daedalus in the *Dédalo* series (Figure.70) is juxtaposed with awkward looking flying devices to suggest ideas of flying or fleeing from present-day Cuba. These objects are rooted in the idea of escape from one's own "labyrinth".[598]

Bruguera's active monoscenic narrative centres on a single event in the myth that introduces the themes of escape and flying as analogies between the ancient Greek

[597] Bruguera's "Announcement" translates as "the next edition invited/welcomed participants from all over the world. It would reprint/republish the discourse on nationality starting from a reflection on Cuba's insular nature, as well as exile and criteria and approaches to identity with focus placed on historical, cultural, sociological, personal and intimate elements". An added "Explanatory note" set forth that size/spatial requirements for articles and the artist included a section underneath that stated that all manner of discourse would qualify — texts, illustrations, classifieds, photos, exposition notices and exhibitions.

[598] Eugenio Valdés Figueroa, "Art in Cuba: The Mask: Utopia and Ideology," *Flash Art* XXX, no. 192 (1997): 54.

mythological story and the current situation in Cuba. The chronotopes of epic and drama and biographical time are evident in this series, weaving together mythological, socio-cultural and political events in Cuba's history with personal elements of the artist's life experiences. The use of her body and its role in making the objects function provides a very personal link between the body of the artist and the narrative of leaving Cuba and what is necessary in order to do so.

Irony is the trope that ultimately governs Bruguera's redefinition of the Greek myth to take on board the lived reality of contemporary Cuban life. This tropological presence is connected to her narrative about the drama of flight toward freedom and about what actions are deemed necessary in order to 'fly' which inevitably involve the contortion or distortion of oneself or of one's ideas. There could also be an another ideological level that can be read into Bruguera's narrative about these flying objects. The premise of these objects is the way in which they become charged with power through human interaction. Similarly, the previously mentioned African-derived objects, *Nkisi Nkonde* are specifically designed to become charged with power through human interaction and will. Bruguera's flying creations can be viewed as a type of Cuban *Nkisi Nkonde*, thus making a connection between the Cuban context and its African-derived belief systems and rituals.

Similarly, *El Peso* (Figure.69) employs an active monoscenic narrative to make a connection between different epochs in Cuba's history and to introduce the recurrent theme of Cuban peoples' resistance to troubled times and possible ways to respond to such problems. The chronotope of epic and drama and biographical time weave Cuba's socio-political history from the time of the Spanish invasion up to the present, together

with the artist's body, though her ritualistic actions of eating dirt and washing herself with the lambs' fat.

Estadística (Figure.67) employs the "medias res" narrative mode centered on the communal activities of Cuban women but the bodies of the protagonists are not present, only their bodily trace through human hair. This narrative mode commences with an important event of a story rather then the first event in time, and such an event is usually followed by a return to an earlier period in time.[599] Bruguera's narrative begins with the depiction of the Cuban flag using its colours, form and iconography. This flag is the symbol of revolutionary ideas and Cuban independence linked to the 1959 Revolution. There are also associations to the wars of independence fought in Cuba since the nineteenth century. As well as the social relevance attached to the flag concerning notions of death, as flags are flown outside Cuban homes to signify when a death or funeral has occurred. So the artist also uses the flag as a metaphor to signify the mourning that all Cubans felt because of the events taking place in the 1990s.

Bruguera also associates the process of gathering, rolling, tying and sewing the hair into a flag with friends to the communal activities of women during colonial and revolutionary times, when everyone had to pull together. She uses real Cuban human hair as the bodily trace that binds the Cuban people to each other historically, culturally, emotionally and mentally. This piece makes connections between the artwork and the Cuban people and between their struggles from the beginning of the country's history as an independent nation right up to their present day difficulties. The switching between the current period, the 1959 Revolutionary period and earlier times in the country's history

[599] Dehejia, 18-19.

inter-relate with the chronotope of biographical time, in a complex narrative in which the artist weaves various historical and socio-public Cuban events with her own personal experiences in the troubled 1990s.

Through the examples discussed in chapters four and five it is evident that the narrative structures and discourses the artists in this study create are homodiegetic; they are the tellers of the stories and also participants in them. All of these women are present in the production of meaning through their choice of narrative, iconography and their bodily presence in the works. But as the creators and tellers of the events, they are placed outside the time/space in which the events occur and outside the chronotopes represented in their work. Thus there are two events presented before us as viewers: the event that is narrated in the artwork and the event of the narration in which the readers participate. These events take place in different times and places, but at the same time, the two events are inextricably united in a single but complex event that is the totality of all the events.[600] It is, therefore, essential to remember that chronotopes are outside the world represented in the text, but not outside the work as a whole. The dialogic enters the world of the author and the reader and these worlds are chronotopic as well.[601]

Place and (Dis) Place — Cuban Dualities and Realities

This chapter has set out ways in which the increasing Cuban Diaspora and emigration has affected all Cubans, whether they are located on or off island, and how notions of

[600]Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M.M. Bakhtin,* ed. Michael Holquist, trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist, (Austin TX: University of Texas Press, 1981), 255–256.
[601] Ibid., 252.

home have been complicated for them as a result. All the artists in this study have located themselves in dual cultural homes as professional and successful artists; they all travel, work and exhibit in foreign places. In addition, the mass exodus of Cubans of all persuasions from the island has created a sense of duality within the country that has not merely affected plastic artists in isolation, but also their friends, family and neighbours. This has created a different dynamic within the thought processes of those based on island.

In psychological terms, the schism caused by the exodus of the 1980 generations of artists, as well as the departure of so many other Cubans, has left an indelible mark on the plastic artists who have come to prominence since the early 1990s. In formal and content terms, the critical dimension to art-making activities has become more pronounced for 1990s artistic generations as a response to Cuban lived realities and their perspectives from inside the island. At the same time, the privileges available to certain successful and predominantly ISA trained artists has become more apparent against the current economic and social backdrop in Cuba. They have been the recipients of increased opportunities to travel outside of Cuba and have gained access to other material and economic benefits too, all of which has had an effect on their art production. As Bruguera puts it,

> "[Having access to movement outside the country] affects your work undoubtedly, because if you have other interests and areas to explore, then the rationing and the electricity problems no longer seem such a problem for you".[602]

Just as there is a geographical distance for Campos-Pons and Pérez that affects their

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[602] Bruguera interview.

perception of lived realities on island, a certain distance from daily Cuban problems has developed for artists like Ramos, Ayón and Bruguera, even though they still officially reside on island. Like most of their 1990s contemporaries they have chosen to remain based in Cuba but travel extensively with work, so in a sense they feel like outsiders in their own country.

> "You have to construct a new life without moving from the place, usually you do that when you move locations and you can reinvent yourself, but we had to do the same inside the island".[603]

As professional artists, they have been placed in positions to travel and meet new people and old Cuban friends. This is substantiated by Ramos' comment that she has developed a more consistent and stable base of friends in Mexico than in Cuba, even though she may not get to see them on a very regular basis. So in a way, she now feels a stronger sense of belonging with her friends in Mexico because they have remained based in one place.[604] This has led her to question the situation on island,

> "Who emigrated — them or me? I live in a country where you need to change your friends every two years because they leave — it is very strange".[605]

The above quote indicates some of the complexities inherent in being a contemporary Cuban artist. For the artists in this study, the formation of their Cuban identity has been related to a disparate and complex range of places, objects, rituals, myths, social, cultural and political events, traditions and bodies that embody memories and form part of their *Weltanschauung*. Their artistic creations have been connected to real

[603] Ibid.
[604] Ramos interview, 12 February 2000.
[605] Ibid.

experiences and places, religion, ideology, history and people, as well as to imagined spaces or territories. This is important because, as Carl Jung explained,

> "Alienation from the unconscious and from its historical conditions spells rootlessness, with danger lying in wait for every individual who loses touch with the dark, maternal, earthly ground of one's being".[606]

For Campos-Pons, Bruguera and Ramos their geo-physical placement in the world and their relationship to everyday Cuban reality and the island has affected their notion of being Cuban through their art production. There is a sense of temporal progression in their work. Yet for Ayón and Pérez there is not such a sense of temporal progression in their work and it has not been affected by their geographical location in the same way but is related to a more intrinsic sense of Cubanness. Both remain(ed) faithful to the same materials and subject matter from their respective locations in and out of Cuba.

The example of Ayón in particular illustrates the complexity of the Cuban situation and the difficulty in categorising contemporary art and artists according to generational affiliations or lived location. She graduated in the 1990s but her exposure to ideologies and artistic influences from the 1980s affected her professional activities and approach. She remained living on island in the 1990s but the harsh realities of life in Cuba since then were never themes overtly present in her collographs. In contrast, socio-economic problems in Cuba are indicative of 1990s artistic trends, as seen in the work of Ayón's peers, Ramos and Bruguera. Also, most 1990s artists have aimed their work to an increasingly international audience, whereas, Ayón's esoteric subject matter requires a level of specific knowledge of Cuban socio-cultural and religious themes, which could be

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[606] Carl Jung, "Mind and Earth, "*Civilisation in Transition* " Collected Works" vol. 10, p. 49, quoted in Levin, 285.

viewed as limiting the reception of her art and its potential audiences outside Cuba. The following chapter will extend this discussion to consider the reception of specific works by these artists outside of Cuba, in conjunction with exploring the ramifications and power inherent in the medium of the plastic arts and in being a Cuban artist.

Chapter Six

Art, Power and the Body of the Audience

This chapter leads on from the previous two, which dealt with the representation of the body in the artwork, the body of the artist and the body of the artwork. This chapter will focus on the body of the audience, in conjunction with the formal and technical devices employed in specific artworks in relation to their effectiveness to reach potential audiences in and out of Cuba. Equally, the reception and audiences broaches the subject of power vis-à-vis Cuban artists and the plastic arts realm, as the production and circulation of elements of meaning could have as their objective, or as their consequence, certain results in the realm of power.[607] The term "power" has multiple connotations. My interest lies in considering power as a form of authority and influence within Cuban art sphere, as power relations are deeply entrenched within the "whole network of the social nexus,"[608] and are attributed to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.[609] In the Cuban context this relates to the nature of the plastic arts as a discursive medium to communicate and to the ideological and sociological ramifications of being a plastic artist within Cuba's unique artistic structure.

The Nature of the Plastic Arts

Advances made by *el proceso* in the democratisation of Cuban art over the last four decades has increased accessibility to the plastic art sphere for the Cuban public through improved education and facilities, in line with the country's socialist parameters. Yet the historical perception of the plastic arts medium has meant that universally it has

[607] James D Faubion, *Power — Essential Works of Foucault 1954–1984*, (London: Penguin Books, 1994), 3: 337.
[608] Ibid., 340, quoting Michel Foucault (1926–1984).
[609] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1990), 1: 93.

been difficult to reach the general public through the visual arts. Therefore, the plastic arts have not traditionally been used as an effective form of mass communication because, as Walter Benjamin (1892–1940) explained, painting is not in any position to present an object for simultaneous collective experience. The particular characteristics of the plastic arts medium invite the spectator to contemplation: before the artwork the spectator can abandon himself to his associations in a way that he cannot do before the movie frame.[610] Thus it is against the nature of the visual arts to be confronted directly by the masses, as there is no way for them to control and organise themselves in their reception to a piece of art, in the way they can do via the medium of film.[611] However, this thesis does not just deal with painted pieces, but with a wide range of media including performance, video and installations. Such media allow the audience a sense of personal contemplation in front of the artwork as well as the ability to take part in a collective simultaneous experience at the same time. They combine the properties of the plastic arts and the film/movie frame in a visual, three-dimensional and active sense. This provides the plastic arts with more potential to be directly confronted and approached by the masses.

However, the difficulty to reach a general Cuban audience through the visual arts has been compounded by the exodus of the 1980s generations and the increasingly international activities of artists in the 1990s. As well as the lack of art resources and materials available to artists who remain in Cuba. Some performances have taken place in Cuba by artists such as Bruguera, but artists have mostly produced work that is shown in elite Cuban artistic institutions and increasingly in international art arenas.

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[610] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, ed. and intro. Hannah Arendt, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 234–238.
[611] Ibid., 234–235.

And, in comparison with other art forms, high art production has reached a relatively small section of Cuban society. This has meant that the potential impact that the visual arts can make as a form of mass discursive communication has been restricted and has limited plastic artists' ability to communicate with the Cuban public, especially outside of the major cities and within major institutions. Consequently, a certain distance exists between the plastic arts, the general public and gallery rituals in Cuba, as in western societies. This societal and institutional eliteness is a barrier that even the Revolution has not managed to effectively tackle, despite the widening of access to the plastic arts sphere in educational and audience terms in the post–1959 era.

In comparison, the literacy drive undertaken by the revolutionary regime in the 1960s fuelled the way in which literature of all kinds was mass-produced in Cuba. This provided writers and poets with access to a much wider general audience than was available for visual artists, but the nature of the written medium has limited its scope for constructive criticism of *el proceso* and led to much censorship for poets and writers. Whereas, by contrast to their peers working in the other arts or media, plastic artists since the 1980s have had more scope to produce art from a critical stance. Furthermore, unlike the solitary process of writing for writers, it has been quite usual for contemporary plastic art events to take place collectively in a close-knit art community, and it has also become standard for them to support and critique each other's projects.

There have been instances of censorship or imprisonment in rare instances in the plastic arts spectrum. Yet censorship has happened to a far less degree within this field than in the 'written' arts, despite the provocative and critical nature of contemporary plastic art production. The *Memoria* newspapers exemplify the power inherent within the

discursive medium of the visual arts. Bruguera created, directed, self financed and distributed the first two editions as part of her personal artistic process to cope with the dire situation in Cuba during the early 1990s.[612] They provide an eloquent example of how crossing the boundary between creative mediums can have negative consequences for plastic artists. The official censorship of both editions indicates Bruguera's problems with Cuban officialdom and the ramifications of the use of the newspaper medium and her concern with sensitive issues. This artist's work has always derived from the political and cultural environment in Cuba with the aim of provoking dialogue and thought, but counter-revolution has never been her aim. Yet the production of *Memoria*, which embodies the views of Cubans on and off island within an established reporting format, whilst extremely innovative was controversial and construed as subversive. The penal code of the Republic of Cuba, Article 237 sets out

> "The preparation, distribution or anonymous publication of any printed matter, or printing any literature without the proper permits is punishable by imprisonment".[613]

This begs the question, why did the authorities decide to only censor Bruguera's work? It suggests that there is a type of societal eliteness and special privileges and power associated with professional Cuban plastic artists and their activities. The Cuban authorities' censorship of the *Memoria* editions in 1994 indicates their displeasure at the circulation of written information they did not authorise. The format for *Memoria* gave the impression of 'officialdom' in its layout and content and these editions are also metaphors for what was happening at that time between artists and the Cuban institutions. Thus the censoring of Bruguera's editions sent out a message to the Cuban

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[612] Luis Camnitzer, "Memoria de la Postguerra," *Art Nexus*, no. 15 (1995): 30.
[613] Ileana Fuentes-Pérez, "By Choice or Circumstance: The Inevitable Exile of Artists," in *Outside Cuba: Contemporary Cuban Visual Artists*, (New Jersey and Miami: Rutgers University and the University of Miami, 1988), 23 quoting *Gaceta Oficial* (Havana), no. 3 (1979): 82.

art world about what would and would not be tolerated at that particularly sensitive time.

Yet it is clear that Cuban plastic artists have been able to work within the Cuban system in a specific way because of their perceived societal role and as their works have been viewed by a relatively small sector of the Cuban population. For instance, *Memoria* was only circulated among the artistic community in Havana, due to the harsh economic problems in Cuba at that time. This meant that the majority of ordinary Cuban citizens, on and off island, were totally unaware of this project.

The leeway the visual arts have been allowed in Cuba has provided them with a level of power to create and comment not afforded to written creative discursive mediums. This is evident in the constructive criticism of *el proceso* that has also occurred in contemporary film as well as in public dialogues, but not in the official press or in print format.[614] Part of the problem stems from the fact that Cuba's daily newspapers are controlled by sectors of the Communist Party, which has meant that the existing system is not truly representative of what is actually happening, and it is also not democratic enough.[615] There is also very little information available to the Cuban public and no reliable historical annals that are not officially approved. Therefore, especially since the early 1990s, contemporary Cuban visual art (and some films) have functioned as a document of daily life, because other artistic and communicative mediums; poetry, literature, newspapers, television and radio have not informed the people about what is really going on.

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[614] David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America: 1910–1990*, (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2002), 86-89. The Revolution's commitment to socialising artistic practice with a more conscious and participatory role for Cubans in the production of culture has led to public dialogues in local level cultural activities with people from all sectors of society attending them.

[615] Ibid., 114–115.

Power in Being a Cuban Artist

As well as widening access to the visual arts within the Cuban cultural realm, the elitism associated with the highest echelons of the Cuban art sphere has been expanded under the auspices of the revolutionary process: ideologically, socially and educationally. All of the artists in this study have navigated their way through the post–1959 art educational system. The value placed on 'high' plastic art endeavours in socialist Cuba is indicated by the fact that most professional Cuban contemporary artists have gone through between eight to twelve years of formal art education before graduating.[616] This culminates in the ISA, as part of a hierarchical and meritocratic system that validates certain artists and affords them a special place in Cuba's artistic sphere. At the same time, the 1959 Revolution inherited a "bourgeois art structure and chose not to alter it radically in order to maintain the freedom of the individual artist".[617] But, as Craven has observed, there are evident inconsistencies in this approach.

> "The hierarchy of professional and non-professional artists in Cuba raises challenging questions in a revolutionary society committed to the historical transcendence of all existing social hierarchies".[618]

One might add that there are also ramifications in terms of power and eliteness for certain individuals within a socialist and communist context. As the advances and reforms in social, educational and ideological terms brought about by *el proceso* have provided a platform that has nurtured plastic artists and placed them in special artistic and social positions.

The parameters of the Cuban artistic hierarchy post–1959 have changed as a direct

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[616] Luis Camnitzer, *New Art of Cuba,* (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1994), 159–164.
[617] Ibid., 117.
[618] Craven, 110.

result of the reforms instigated through *el proceso* and movement across social, cultural and class boundaries. There has been a shift to a plastic arts tradition that encompasses all Cubans, including Afro-Cubans and women, at all levels — educational, governmental and institutional. The implementation of advanced educational facilities at the ISA has led to the formation of an ideological and socially elite visual arts structure, in which the privileges available for some relate to their status as visual artists from specific institutions. Artistic generations post–1980 have gained access to this elite through their own merit, but the majority of these artists have derived from popular social, cultural and economic backgrounds that would not be considered elite.

Post–1980s generations have remained very connected to the working class milieux. These artistic generations have been taught that they are the conscience of the Revolution and that they must consider their obligations toward their society and to be critical voices within it. As discussed in chapter two, these artists can be considered the products of the Revolution. Their artistic practices and education are the result of socialist reforms and the ideological dimensions assigned to them as social producers and critical thinkers in line with the ideas of Guevara and Mariátegui.

Predominantly members of the popular classes as well as an artistic avant-garde, these artists have assumed the right to question, to experiment and propose alternatives from their specific circumstances. They have become voices speaking out about issues they deem important,[619] indicating the social and ethical dimension to being a Cuban artist. This has placed them in a unique position within their society, with the ability to comment

[619] Sandra Ramos, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, 12 February 2000.

whilst other intellectuals and ordinary Cuban citizens do not have the same opportunities to do so. Contemporary Cuban art production thus represents the worldviews of a range of Cuban voices, male, female, Hispano and Afro-Cuban, with a disparate array of subjects and topics covered. These artists have utilised an elite form of discourse — the high arts — to communicate in combination with extending vernacular culture. Indeed, Cuban popular traditions have been critically elevated as a cultural vocabulary for the new Cuban art.[620]

Traditionally within the realm of the visual arts, artistic complexity has been a class distinction, as the complexity of 'high' art has been used to establish aesthetic superiority over 'low' art forms or popular culture.[621] Generations of highly trained Cuban artists post-1981 have turned this distinction on its head. They have produced sophisticated art creations embodying popular culture and introducing the worldviews from their population groups into avant-garde high art practice. This has been a particularly interesting and unique cultural phenomenon, which has communicated and interjected the vernacular inside the dominant, high art paradigm from within Cuban popular culture, which in turn has sprouted as a "high art flower".[622] Such creative endeavours constitute a unique kind of informed expression of the popular made by active participants from within that social sphere and consciousness. They also reflect the close association between everyday Cuban experiences and the art production of professional plastic artists, as these artists are part of the same situations and have the same concerns as ordinary Cubans.[623]

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[620] Craven, 94.
[621] John Fiske, *Understanding Popular Culture*, (London: Routledge, 1989), 121–126.
[622] Gerardo Mosquera, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, 26 February 2000.
[623] Ibid.

The fact that such artists have utilised vernacular culture as a new form of discourse begs some interesting questions about issues of identity, power and the artistic use of vernacular discourses within high art production: can the subaltern comment, and who is listening? Once they comment, can they then, by definition, no longer be considered subaltern? If so, where does this place professional Cuban artists in a socialist societal sense?

Contemporary professional Cuban artists in the post–1980, including those in this study, construct Cuban identity — comprising of Third World, socialist, popular, *mestizo* and western elements — and produce their own contemporaneity through their critical intellectual activities as a result of their unique circumstances.[624] Moreover, they support

> "A new internationalism in art and their right as peripheral artists to help to shape that internationalism".[625]

The popularity of Cuban art internationally can only aid artists in their endeavour to help to shape a "new internationalism in art." Contemporary professional Cuban artists, male and female, are potentially able to affect the national discussion on Cuban realities and the country's evolving socialist process. But they do so from an elite societal and artistic position that embodies the worldviews of the non-elite. Their ability to comment from their particular societal positions places their art and them as artists in powerful positions to put forward ideas and points of view that are not the 'official' views of the Cuban regime. Indeed, the plastic arts sphere has been almost the only spaces where much needed critical analyses of Cuban society have taken place, such as the problems that

[624] Osvaldo Sánchez, "The Children of Utopia," Catalogue (*No Man is an Island: Young Cuban* Art), (Finland: Pori Art Museum, 1995), 57.
[625] Marketta Seppälä, "Foreword," Catalogue (*No Man is an Island: Young Cuban Art*), (Finland: Pori Art Museum, 1990), 11.

confront contemporary socialism.[626]

In line with this, commentators have noted that the contemporary visual arts spectrum has evolved within the parameters initially set out by Guevara (via Mariátegui) and have encouraged

> "A more profound, creative, democratic and polemical atmosphere in its public demands and in the verification of the revolutionary path".[627]

Particularly 1990s artists, such as Ramos and Bruguera, view their role as being able to comment on the changes their society has undergone post-1989, their lived realities and issues of importance to the Cuban people.[628] Their sense of duty is in keeping with the ideas they were raised with; that one's individual life has repercussions in the collective and that social responsibility is a duty and an acknowledgment of one's personal gratitude to the Revolution.[629] Thus their social consciences effect their attitude toward their roles as contemporary Cuban artists. Moreover, the use of vernacular discourse since the 1980s led to an increased sense of access for the Cuban popular classes vis-à-vis the realm of the high arts, also in keeping with Guevara and Mariátegui's ideas. This successful socialisation of avant-garde art production was evident at the first Cuban biennial for the visual arts, held at the Centro de Wifredo Lam in 1984, which was attended by over 175,000 people from all sectors of the population.[630] However, this trend has been reversed to a greater degree since the 1990s due to external and internal factors affecting the visual arts realm.

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[626] Gerardo Mosquera, "The 14 Sons of William Tell," Catalogue (*No Man is an Island: Young Cuban Art*), trans. Alan West, (Finland: The Pori Art Museum, 1990), 42.
[627] Sánchez, 57.
[628] Sandra Ramos, interview with the author, tape recording, Havana, 26 February 2000.
[629] Octavio Zaya, "Tania Bruguera in conversation with Octavio Zaya," *Cuba — Maps of Desire,* ed. Gerald Matt, trans. Achy Obejas (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 244.
[630] Craven, 85-87.

In the 1980s cultural environment, plastic artists were very focused on the local context and trying to make art function outside of the gallery circuit/space for a Cuban audience.[631] The changed parameters for artists since the 1990s have, by necessity, affected avant-garde art practices within Cuba and the target audiences artists have aimed for through their art. The ethical dimension to plastic art endeavours has remained in the 1990s, but the visual arts have become an increasingly internationally orientated and exclusive cultural and social space. Hence, this field has become even less of a viable method of mass communication in Cuba, despite the successes in the 1980s to increase accessibility to the general public as part of *el proceso's* democratisation of art. This has placed plastic artists in a precarious situation vis-à-vis the ideological and dialogical function afforded to post–1980 art generations. However, Bruguera's art production and approach is an exception and more in keeping with a 1980s ethos, as will be discussed further in the following "Audience" sub-section.

There are also another dimensions that relate to the power and benefits inherent in being a successful, professional artist in Cuba. Although visual artists were leading the cultural renovations taking place in their society from the outset of the new art developments in 1981, young artists and their art were not fully supported as 'official artists'. Despite the Cuban authorities' attempt to redress the cultural dogmatism that had taken root since the late 1960s/1970s, official uneasiness continued, with the 1980s art movements not wholeheartedly supported by the regime. In fact there was a permanent tension and a certain distance between officials and the new artistic movements.[632] *Volumen Uno* artists and subsequent artistic generations were perceived

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[631] Havana's cultural activity was very intensive in the 1980s, with a biennial of art, an annual film festival, Casa de las Americas literary contest and the creation of a Latin American film school and foundation.
[632] Gerardo Mosquera, interview by author, tape recording, Havana, 17 February 2000.

by Cuban officialdom as a silent menace, signalling the possibility of new developments in that direction.

This impacted the artistic sphere because the Cuban government was the only viable market for these avant-garde artists in the 1980s but, by and large, the government chose not to buy their works. Hence, the Cuban National Museum only owns minor works by seminal 1980s artists. This highlights a particular problem associated with the Cuban Marxist-Leninist controlled regime and the visual arts. It was not Ministry of Culture art officials who decided what art to buy on behalf of the nation; it was the bureaucrat's decision — the Ministers of Agriculture and Tobacco, etc. They commissioned work from specific artists and it is quite likely that there was an element of corruption involved in these choices, which depended on the artist having good connections with the right officials as well as the particular official's personal artistic preferences.

Yet the new avant-garde 1980s artists flourished in spite of the official response. Although they were not commissioned by the Cuban authorities to produce works, as discussed in chapter two, they were supported by the art system and placed in teaching positions after graduating. They were then able to instigate monumental changes in the visual arts sphere — pedagogically and in formal and content terms. These changes were thus the result of pressure being exerted from the bottom up, i.e. from the young artists and teachers themselves, not from the bureaucratic, institutional arts structure.

This suggests some degree of influence and authority to affect the status quo on the part of artists themselves. However, the activities of these artists coincided with a different

consciousness among certain "doves," cultural officials like Mosquera, Leiseca and Aulet, which helped enormously to effect certain changes.

These officials were placed in positions and had the power to make changes in the 1980s, as a result of the regime's appreciation of the excessive cultural repression that occurred in the previous decade. The situation has changed in the 1990s. Mosquera has likened relations between artists and the authorities to a dangerous game of chess, in which artists are engaged in playing the system. In this "double game" of discourse and wits, everyone knows what the artwork means and what the artist wishes to express but the point has been not to express it explicitly. This provides the liberal, cultural officials in charge of art censorship some leeway to protect themselves vis-à-vis the bureaucrats, or "*halcones*" (*falcons*), who supervise their work.[633]

In specific relation to the women in this study, Sandra Ramos' experiences also indicate the dimensions of potential power inherent in being a Cuban artist. She has experienced first hand problems with the Cuban government in recent years, not through censorship of her work, but via her immediate family members. Beginning in June 1999, the Ramos family came under attack from the government when her father was accused of collaborating with the U.S., a claim vehemently denied by the Ramos'. Her family members worked in disparate scientific disciplines not remotely connected to each other; her father and brother were scientists, her sister a pharmacist and her brother-in-law an environmental biologist, but the government targeted all of them. As a result, the artist's father, brother, sister and brother-in-law all lost their professional jobs.[634] But Sandra

[633] Ibid.
[634] Liane Ramos, conversation with author, Havana, 26 February 2000. Sandra and Liane Ramos' father was an influential scientist in the early years of the revolutionary government and he made some very important research contributions for the Cuban government.

has remained unaffected by the government's actions against her family and she has been the only family member not directly targeted by them.

I offer the speculative possibility that, as a professional artist, Sandra Ramos has benefited from specific privileges that other Cuban intellectuals (such as scientists) with less visible and international statuses do not enjoy. This suggests the inclusion of contemporary artists like Ramos into an intellectual and social Cuban elite. There are also other factors that support this theory. Since this unfortunate episode the artist has had to financially support her entire family, highlighting the financial eliteness associated with professional, contemporary plastic art activities. After the loss of their careers, her sister and brother-in-law work for her, dealing with the administrative and financial sides of her art production and liaising with buyers, critics and institutions.[635]

Aside from the material benefits afforded to a successful international artist like Ramos, her different treatment by the Cuban authorities indicates a special status applied to certain plastic artists. As a high profile artist with international credentials, exhibits and collections Ramos is highly sought after with frequent opportunities to travel abroad, and so any restrictions placed upon her and her artistic activities would become public, internationally known and discussed. This is not to say that the Cuban government has never punished plastic artists. As well as censorship, such as Bruguera's *Memoria*, there has been the threat of imprisonment throughout the decades since 1959 for artists of all kinds.

[635] Ibid.

However, I suggest that given the specific problems that her family has endured and her exclusion from official punishments, it would seem that Ramos has been placed in a special position, unique from the other members of her family who are also professionals in their respective areas. However, when questioned about her position as a contemporary visual artist as part of a Cuban elite, Ramos replied that in her view artists are always part of an elite in any society.[636] There are elements of truth in this statement, as the plastic arts and artists have always been associated with the culturally elite high arts spectrum, as mentioned earlier in this chapter. Yet Ramos' case does suggest that the sciences might be perceived by the regime as less internationally visible and more vital and/or more threatening fields.

Audience

As discussed previously, Cuban artists since the 1980s have been taught and placed in positions from which to think critically and dialogically about issues that affect them, their country and the people. Like the cultural and artistic pluralism evident in Cuba during the early 1960s, the new waves of artists' since the 1980s significantly expanded the media resources, subject matter of Cuban art and the audiences addressed.[637] In line with their ideological and educational orientations, they have actively dealt with topics with specific relevance to their country and *el proceso*.

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[636] Ramos interview, 26 February 2000.
[637] Craven, 97.

"Art is a dialogue. You cannot be a monologue because when artists become a monologue they start to be a victim of their own work. They start to do illustration rather than produce art".[638]

As Bruguera's quote illustrates, artists are placed in unique positions to comment through their medium. By definition this suggests a social function for their art practice and a special (and powerful) place for them as artists, and with implications for the audiences they seek to reach and the reasons why. Yet it is not so straightforward to say that therefore, plastic art production equals power in Cuban society. For instance, Bruguera is an artist who is particularly concerned with the relationship between power and the visual arts sphere. Her utilisation of the newspaper format with *Memoria* was a clear reminder that sometimes the purpose of art can be as a provider of information and information is power. Yet *Memoria* was censored and only accessible to people within the arts community. So, although in an ideological sense, contemporary artists have the ability to circulate ideas and information from their creative platforms, in reality the nature of their medium, plus their solitary art activities and frequent overseas experiences have distanced them from potential Cuban audiences.

Furthermore, art developments in the 1990s have proved to be a win-win situation for the Cuban government. The regime has sought to demonstrate a tolerant attitude overseas by promoting the plastic arts, whilst they have still censored some works.[639] And in communicative terms, the critical and satirical artistic voices prevalent in contemporary avant-garde art are directed to audiences outside of Cuba primarily, or in Cuba among a small elite of art intellectuals. Such ideas are not communicated on a mass level on island for the reasons already discussed in this chapter. Therefore potentially dangerous works of art tend to have little real resonance beyond art circles

[638] Tania Bruguera, interview by author, tape recording, New York, 9 December 1999.
[639] Sarah Milroy, "The Sly Politics of Cuban Art," *The Globe and Mail* (Vancouver), 5 April 1997, sec. C5.

and so pose very little risk to the island's ruling regime.[640] Plastic art practice thus promotes and aids Cuba's image abroad and its economy at home, but does not threaten the internal situation.[641]

Avant-garde plastic art practice has become a valuable export commodity for the Cuban authorities. This could suggest that contemporary artists fit into a higher government programme, albeit inadvertently, because so much revenue is accrued from the plastic art market. And to a degree, this may have been the route that the Cuban authorities have decided to adopt since the mid-1990s as a consequence of the dire economic circumstances the country has faced. But ultimately, so much attention has been focused on the plastic arts sphere because this spectrum is recognised internationally as being a very talented and vibrant one, producing sophisticated and critically relevant art. Furthermore, it is important to bear in mind that contemporary art and artists are the products of *el proceso* and the result of its specific artistic, educational and ideological advances and the unique trajectory the plastic arts spectrum has taken since the 1980s.

Professional Cuban plastic artists' ability to travel, study and work overseas has allowed them to expand their life experiences, knowledge, potential audiences and the media they use. This has the added advantage of more scope for creative expression to produce constructive criticism of *el proceso* from within the system and to actively engage with the problems Cuba faces. The paradox is that the particular properties and the status conferred on the Cuban plastic art-making spectrum have allowed artists a platform to communicate to others, but the nature of the medium and events in the

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[640] Michael Z Wise, "Tweaking the Beard of the Maximum Leader," *New York Times*, 12 June 1994, sec. H, 36.
[641] Dr. Steven Wilkinson, "The Importance of being irreverent: Irony, satire and parody in Cuban visual art during the Special period," paper presented at the Cuba Forum conference, ILAS, London, 4 July 2002.

1990s have distanced these artists from a general Cuban audience. Artists are placed in the privileged position of being able to provide non-official and alternative viewpoints and information through their art production. But this is directed to an increasingly international and specialist art market by necessity because these artists have had to target their work toward a broader audience than their 1980s peers did in order to survive the current economic climate in Cuba. Indeed, one of the ironies of the Cuban situation post–1990 has been that the audiences for contemporary art production have been likely to be other Cuban artists and intellectuals, international and national curators, critics and overseas art collectors, not the Cuban public.

For an artist like Bruguera this is frustrating, as she consciously seeks to create in the spirit of the 1980s generations and often works in ephemeral mediums such as performance and site specific multi media installations producing work that are not marketable. Issues of elitism and power surrounding the visual arts sphere are aspects of particular concern to her, which has led her to attempt to make her art creations accessible to those outside of the gallery/museum circuit. She tries to ensure that many of her artistic creations function outside traditional art establishments, in real life situations, such as *El Peso de Culpa* and *Art in America*. She has also stated that she would like to be able to reproduce the prototypes from her *Dédalo o el Imperio de Salvación* and the *Memoria* editions and to distribute them to the Cuban people. This is revealing as to her artistic and ethical aims and the way she perceives her social role as a Cuban artist.

Although all of the artists in this study derive from the same educational, artistic and ideological background, Bruguera's unique approach, choice of medium and her

concerns place her in a special position in terms of thinking about audience and reception of artworks. She views art as an agent for social change and has always considered Cubans as the main and first audience for her work. Indeed, it has been important to this artist that whenever ordinary Cubans see her work, wherever they are, they understand what it is about or what they are participating in. At the same time, she appreciates that not everyone has access to, nor understands much of the art produced by contemporary artists, as it is often very metaphorical. She seeks to find a middle path between being a highly trained, successful professional artist producing sophisticated and erudite works informed by contemporary ideas within the context of postmodern art debates, and making her art understandable to a wide audience.

Engaging with the audience is one of the main reasons Bruguera particularly likes live performance as an artistic medium.[642] She discovered that the medium of live performance could provide a radical commentary on the culture in which she exists, as live performance cannot be fully controlled or censored and 'liveness' is perceived as synonymous with reality. She therefore favours performance and video methods as aesthetic tools to help her escape the long arm of censorship in Cuba, and to exert her communicational power as an artist.

Plastic artists based off island and those who live in Cuba but exhibit extensively in the international arena may be placed in a better position than Cuban writers and poets in the same circumstances. As, in the transition from one place to another the visual world seems to lose less in translation for potential audiences, as visual language is, by and

[642] Zaya, 249.

large, more "transportable" than the written or verbal kind.[643] Yet certain works of Bruguera's highlight how the audience in different socio-cultural contexts can affect a work's function, reception and communicative ability, because, as with installation art, performance has no autonomous space: it is created at exhibition sites and its essence includes spectator participation.

Bruguera's performances of *El Peso* (Figure.69) in 1997 are apt examples, as she was articulating, enacting and presupposing a set of concerns that, to some extent, had to be held in common by the audience. Furthermore, this performance piece was the first work in which the artist consciously dealt with the privileges available to Cuban artists and the burden of guilt that brings with it — a topic with specific resonance in the Cuban context. This is the mechanics of how her performances have worked. She draws upon Cuban traditions and rituals to make direct reference to the country's history as a rich mixture of many elements.

El Peso's first performance was held in the artist's neighbourhood, in her home in Old Havana with *Estadística* (Figure.67) as the backdrop. Her neighbours were among the audience members for this performance, and they enjoyed it because it was a familiar experience for them.[644] After the performance, Bruguera and her neighbours ate the lamb as a communal event, as it would have been considered wasteful not to eat it in light of the food shortages in Cuba. Even though the lamb had been part of her art performance, there was no dilemma about eating it afterward.

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[643] Linda Nochlin, "Art and the Conditions of Exile: Men/Women, Emigration/Expatriation," *Exile and Creativity: Signposts, Travelers, Outsiders, Backward Glances*, ed. Susan Rubin Suleiman (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1998), 37.
[644] Zaya, 251.

However, when the artist performed *El Peso* in Copenhagen, Denmark, without *Estadística* as the backdrop and in a neutral art space, the reactions of the European audience were markedly different and the meat was discarded after the performance.[645] The predominantly European audience was unlikely to fully understand the relevance of the complex symbolism and iconography presented in this piece, because it related specifically to Cuban historical traditions and contemporary realities, and the work's communicative ability was dependent upon an understanding of those issues. In both contexts — European and Cuban — the reactions of the audience followed what appeared to be the logical thing to do in that circumstance; highlighting the economic, cultural and ideological divides between places and people, and the roles assigned to art practice and artists within specific societies.

Bruguera's 1997 U.S. study opportunity has been an important learning curve in her development as an artist, allowing her to develop her feelings of empathy with a wider Cuban and international audience. Her work produced there, *Art in America (The Dream)* was informed by that specific socio-cultural context and her knowledge has been enhanced by this overseas experience. As a result her art has begun to embrace the universal human need for placement and belonging. Therefore in terms of reception and audience, Bruguera's experiences outside of Cuba have affected her art production as since then she targets her work to an increasingly universal audience. She wants to make her art known to a wider non-Cuban and non-art specialist audience. This gives her work a special resonance in relation to the socially relevant role art can play, especially in the current political context of the growing displacement of humans all over

[645] Tania Bruguera, panel discussion at ArtTable Inc., The Kitchen, New York, 7 December 1999.

the world.

As with Bruguera, attempting to make her art understandable to a wide audience whilst still keeping the social relevance to the Cuban context is also evident in Ramos' art endeavours. When the artist exhibited *Migraciones II* and *Criaturas de isla* (Figures.55/56) in Cuba and Mexico, her use of universally accepted signs — valises and luggage trunks — to transmit ideas about emigration and displacement reinforced for the audience the literal watery reality that lay in wait for the potential Cuban *balsero*. These objects add to the phenomenal art experience for all her audiences.

Developing that idea further, the artist's use of video in the multi-media project *Inmersiones y Enterramientos*, allowed her to recreate Cuban lived reality for international audiences in London and Mexico in a very direct manner. These installations anticipate the body of the viewer (unfamiliar with the experience of Cubans living on island) as they move through the spaces and the artist engages the audience with some of the situations faced by Cubans in their daily existence. The spectator in *Maquinaria para ahogar las penas* (Figure.59) can actually drink beer from the pipe and hear and see the sea at the same time, effectively recreating Cuban actions and experiences. Similarly, in the other video-installation for this series, *Buzos* (*Divers*) (1999) **[Fig.72]**, the spectator has to make a literal plunge into the garbage container in order to see the video. The audience is thus placed in the same position as the Cuban 'divers' who have to dive into rubbish skips on a daily basis, to find scraps of food and other objects that may be of some use to them.

The transportability of plastic/aesthetic ideas and objects to locations and audiences

outside of Cuba was also demonstrated by Campos-Pons in the late 1980s, with her opportunity to live and study in Canada. Since her earliest days as an artist Campos-Pons always expressed an interest in controversial and sensitive topics. She has also always been very interested in making connections with the audience wherever she exhibits.[646] Her Canadian study experience built on her artistic preoccupations and helped to more fully shape her views about race issues from a new lived perspective. Resulting from that, she produced a new version of a previous work, *Hablando con árboles, pino negro, pino blanco, especie endémica* (1990) (*Speaking of trees, black pine, white pine, endemic species* — see chapter four) **[Fig.73]**.

The Canadian version was the result of Campos-Pons' desire to make a social commentary on race issues from a North American context. As an Afro-Cuban female living in a radically altered context and environment, she was able to experience racial issues from a different perspective and to think about it critically. The primary alterations that she made to the Canadian version of this installation responded to her particular perception of the country. She originally named the piece in reference to cedar trees, but she changed the tree species to pine to reflect the different natural habitats found in various places. This refers in an analogous and metaphorical way to the different types of people found in different contexts. Both versions of this work were directed toward her personal life situation during that period. The situation in Cuba had become very difficult by the late 1980s in many respects, and this had ramifications for her relationship with her partner (who later became her husband) in cultural, social, racial and political terms.[647]

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[646] Magdalena Campos-Pons, interview by author, tape recording, Cambridge MA, 14 October 1999.
[647] Mosquera, 48.

Her relocation to the U.S. in 1990 and her lived experiences there, combined with the geopolitical dynamics of the U.S./Cuba relationship, have been important elements that need to be factored into a consideration of the production, reception and potential audiences for her work. Her interest in the notion of art as a dialogue has continued, reflecting her Cuban artistic and ideological background and training. For example, the inclusion of both Spanish and English languages in *When I am Not Here, Estoy Alla* (Figure.37) highlights this. Through the use of her native language, in conjunction with the particular visual iconography, the artist attempts to cause some phenomenal longing on the part of the American audience for the comfort of their own mother tongue. That moment of semantic/emotional longing can help to create a deeper and more meaningful identification and reaction for the viewer in relation to the artist's sense of displacement and longing for Cuba.[648]

Campos-Pons has also utilised the medium of live performance to establish a relationship with the audience, and to oblige them to reconsider the whole meaning of her work. But she stopped enacting live performances as people began to expect it from her, and for her live performance should be a phenomenologically led, spontaneous experience, not a routine part of the art process.[649] However, she consciously plans her installation works anticipating the body of the viewer as they move through the spaces. Consequently, it is important to her to examine and control how her installation pieces spatially and emotionally address the audience.[650]

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[648] Michael D Harris, "Meanwhile, the Girls were Playing," Catalogue (*María Magdalena Campos-Pons: Meanwhile, the Girls were Playing*), (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT List Visual Arts Center, *n.p.*, 1999), 24.
[649] Magdalena Campos-Pons, interview by author, tape recording, Jamaica Plain MA, 12 December 1999.
[650] Harris, 21.

Her reconstruction of the fountain from La Vega in *A Town Portrait: Memory Streams* highlights this point. The spectator is required to physically move around the fountain in order to read the text, reenacting the childhood game that Campos-Pons played, Ring-around-the-rosy [Figure.40 detail II]. By moving in such a manner, the audience becomes phenomenologically involved in the art experience and their emplacement is an active component of the work. In *Meanwhile, The Girls Were Playing* (Figure.42), the phenomenological experience of the artwork was also very apparent to me as a spectator. According to my own phenomenological intentionality it was a very feminine space full of comforting sounds, colours, textures, adding to my sense of the artist's childhood experiences.

The use of a variety of artistic formats including visual narratives, word and image, multi-media and performance by Ramos, Bruguera and Campos-Pons has enabled them to produce pieces that function on phenomenological levels for the viewer in many contexts and to include the viewer within the work as a whole. In contrast, Pérez and Ayón's two-dimensional artistic formats — photography and collography respectively — do not function in such phenomenological ways.

The audiences they have sought to address through their art have not been influenced by their opportunities to live and exhibit on the international stage. These women have chosen to work consistently in the same medium and with the same subject matter throughout their careers. Furthermore, their subject matters require a level of understanding of the Cuban religious and socio-cultural context by the audience that affect the reception of their works to the unknowing viewer. However, their respective works have been very highly regarded in the international art arena and these artists

have participated in major art events and exhibits worldwide, which indicates a greater appreciation of and willingness by the art world to engage with Cuban topics. In that regard, the parameters for possible readings and meanings found in their works are greatly increased, especially in relation to Ayón's collographs as discussed in chapter four. And, the more that all the Cuban artists in this study and in general achieve outside of Cuba, the more potential power they hold as artists to comment and communicate ideas with more people and wider audiences.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated a variety of ways in which contemporary Cuban art practice can be meaningfully read in relation to these artists' senses of self-perception and what that might mean for them. It has addressed the topics, formal, iconographical and semiotic techniques and methods and materials they drawn upon to construct their senses of Cuban identity. As artists working within the critical and artistic post–1980s framework, they have all consciously been preoccupied with issues of identity in their artworks. In keeping with the eclectic nature of current Cuban art practices, the diversity found in these women's creative endeavours indicates the complex nature of Cuban society and how the notion of identity is bound up with many issues. These artists' work is a reflection of the era in which they live and the artistic concerns that have come to fruition since the 1980s as a backlash to 1970s Cuban art developments.

Contemporary art practices should be seen as a continuum of Cuba's art historical trajectory. The fundamental social, ideological and educational transformations generated by the Cuban revolutionary process have profoundly affected all spheres, including the artistic one. In the realm of the visual arts, the 'revolutionary' transformations in the guise of the implementation of specific socialist aesthetic ideals deriving from Latin American intellectual sources have been fundamental to the trajectory art production post–1980. Contemporary Cuban art production falls within the realm of socialist art production, but it does not adhere to the rigid socialist realist prescriptions set down for plastic art found in other communist countries. In these women's perceived roles as plastic artists, they have sought to undertake their art

making in the mode of Guevara, in keeping with the socialist aesthetic discourses he set out in the early 1960s. This is indicative of the success of his original revolutionary hopes for Cuban plastic art practices and artists, and it is fair to say that contemporary Cuban art generations have achieved a great deal.

The women in this study have well-defined notions of their ethical responsibilities to their society and the dialogical function that has been attributed to the visual arts medium. All remain loyal Cubans fiercely proud of their heritage and history,[651] yet none are naïve enough to believe that *el proceso* is without fault, corruption or scope for improvement. This should not be simplistically viewed as either reacting against or reinforcing Castroist orthodoxies. Instead, plastic artistic output post–1980 has been full of relevance to the core issues of Cuban lived experience, with artists playing vital roles in reflecting and shaping the national situation.

For some, such as Campos-Pons, Bruguera and Ramos, it has been important to voice their scepticism about the habitual rhetoric and unproductive aspects of the revolutionary regime, but they have sought their art to provide constructive criticism, aimed at the continual improvement of *el proceso*. The moral dimension they have felt as plastic artists to bring critical consciousness has been fundamentally related to their senses of being Cuban.

Importantly, these critical, dialogical artistic processes have taken place within the

[651] Marilyn A. Zeitlin, "Luz Brilliante," [Catalogue-online] (Arizona: Arizona State University, 1998, accessed 2 November 1999) ; available from http://asuma.fa.asu.edu/cuba/essay.html ; Internet.

institutional and ideological parameters of the official Cuban artistic sphere. As a powerful communicative medium, the Cuban plastic arts sphere has often produced critical and provocative works, such as *Memoria de la postguerra*. Through such pieces contemporary art generations have endeavoured to place art in a position "not just to embellish, but to annoy and probe society with their questions and answers".[652] Moreover, as Coco Fusco aptly stated,

> "[Cuban] art falls into the precarious space between public and private language, supported, published and/or exhibited by the State, but produced by individuals who do not speak for it. It is a volatile space in which individuality within Cuban socialism is perpetually being redefined".[653]

The impressive advances in the plastic arts sphere demonstrate the successes of the Cuban Revolution's socio-cultural policies and the ideological shifts that have occurred. The artists in this study are testimony to Guevara's notion of the *Cuban hombre nuevo*. They are the recipients of an advanced art education that many artists in more economically advantaged countries do not have. They are the result of social reforms in the field of art education post–1959 and e*l proceso's* aim to increase the ability of previously marginalised sectors of Cuban society — the popular classes, especially women and Afro-Cubans — to gain access to the highest echelons of Cuban art education and production. However, despite the democratising gains in production, access and audiences for the visual arts, there remain proportionately less female plastic artists than male ones, and very few female artists of colour. This does suggest that there are still limitations placed on specific sectors of the Cuban population for access to the professional, successful plastic arts sphere that reflect wider racial, social

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[652] Antonio Eligio Fernández, "Cuban Art: A Key to the Gulf and How to Use it," Catalogue (*No Man is an Island: Young Cuban Art*), (Finland: Pori Art Museum, 1990), 75.

[653] Charles Merewether, "Light me another Cuba- Late Modernism after the Revolution," Catalogue (*Made in Havana: Contemporary Art from Cuba*), (Sydney: Art Gallery of New South Wales, 1988), 16, quoting Coco Fusco, "CUBA: Cultural Policy, Cultural Politics" *Impulse* 13, no. 3 (1987).

and gender disparities.

The art production of the women in this study truly reflects the voice of the people. The identities they have constructed are generic representations of Cuban people, as they remain close to their neighbourhoods and familial ties, with their work being representative of the concerns of the nation. Thus they have discussed non-elite topics, and their constructions are valid because they comment from their own experiences, which are relevant to Cuban society as a whole. They have utilised popular and vernacular forms of discourse in their work because these form part of their worldviews, thus their avant-garde art products have disrupted the boundaries between 'high' and 'low' art forms.

At the same time, the Cuban plastic arts spectrum has remained an elite one, despite the communist bent of Cuban society and the social advances made by *el proceso.* Therefore, although the identities of the artists in this study do not differ from ordinary Cubans, these women have also been included into a societal, artistic and economic elite in relation to their statuses as plastic art professionals, which sets them apart from their fellow citizens. Indeed, participation in such a plastic arts elite would seem to be largely mediated and restricted to professional artists, especially those who have attended the ISA. This exclusivity has been oriented towards the classification of artists by recourse to their training and pedagogy. The Cuban perception and designation is that 'real artists' are those that attend the ISA institution, rather than oriented by colour, race, gender or social issues or background. This has placed such plastic artists in unique positions within contemporary Cuban society and within the art world. They have been able to critically comment on society when other intellectuals and ordinary Cuban

citizens have not.

The artistic utilisation of the female body and Afro-Cuban themes pre– and post–1959 have provided useful comparative frameworks to examine how iconographies have changed and how these themes inform about the changed perceptions of Cuban identity regarding race and gender issues vis-à-vis social reforms and advancements since the Revolution. Thus these women's art productions have been read as historically revealing documents about being Cuban females in relation to their use of specific themes and with regard to the plastic arts spectrum as part of a post–1959 Cuban socialist framework.

Their works have presented a model for contemporary female aesthetic participation, as the incorporation of the female body/image, albeit in many varied stylistic, formal, iconographic and semiotic manifestations, is a common underlying factor in all their art endeavours. Their art corpuses demonstrate how female artists' post–1980 have succeeded in reclaiming the female body through their work to reflect their notions of identity and their lived realities. Many other topics including Afro-Cuban religions, ritual, myth, Cuban historical events and figures, poetry, displacement and the Cuban Diaspora have been shown to be important considerations for the self-perceptions of these artists, suggesting the relevance of these topics in the lives of Cuban people. Yet these artists' work demonstrates that notions of Cuban identity cannot be exclusively linked to one single theme, as they have each employed diverse themes, artistic methods and techniques to effectively express their individual ways of being Cuban and what factors are meaningful for them.

For this reason the complexities involved in categorising these artists' notions of self-perception solely by criteria, such as their generational affiliations or the locations where they reside have been shown to be problematic. Although in general, the artists in this study can be said to be representative of two generations of Cuban female artists, this is too simplistic an explanation. Their diverse life trajectories and personalities along with their eclectic and complex artistic approaches in form and content terms highlight the difficulty of making any generalised statements about contemporary Cuban artists and art production.

Ayón and Bruguera's artistic concerns and life situations indicate the problems of labelling and assessing notions of identity based solely upon artistic generations. Their respective works have expanded beyond generational, stylistic and ideological affiliations associated with 1990s artists. Aligned to this, their specific personas and interests have affected the iconographies and topics they have chosen to deal with. Bruguera, like Campos-Pons is more naturally inclined to voice her opinions about taboo or political and socially sensitive topics. Whereas, Pérez and Ayón are more introverted characters and their art processes have been concerned with personal, philosophical, mythological and religious concepts, or less obviously politically motivated subjects.

The schism that has occurred between 1980s/1990s artistic generations is a gauge of wider societal and ideological changes in Cuban society. This artistic schism has led to artists living in geographically disparate locations and these varied lived placements have influenced some of the artists' sense of self-perception and their iconographies, but not in all cases. For all of them, the ideologies and beliefs they were brought up with and were taught have remained with them, irrespective of their physical placements in

the world. Their senses of social and ethical responsibility as plastic artists to think critically and engage in a dialogue through their art has remained, as has the distinct relevance of their topics to Cuba.

For Ramos and Bruguera on island and Campos-Pons off island, their actual placements in the world and their relationship to the island and its lived realities has affected their lives and artistic corpuses. But for Ayón and Pérez, on and off island respectively, their physical locality in time and space has not impacted their work. Their art productions consistently relate to an intrinsic sense of Cubanness that is linked to the country's socio-cultural, popular, religious, ritual and mythological traditions and consciousness.

Therefore, despite Pérez's lived reality in Mexico for the last eight years this has not infiltrated her artistic production at the level of meaning. Whereas, Campos-Pons' lived experience in the U.S. has impacted her work, as her artistic concerns since then have been related to her exploration of her Cuban identity but not to her specific lived circumstances in the U.S.. Her displacement from her homeland has affected her art production and there is a sense of temporal development evident in her corpus linked to her dislocation from Cuba. What can be said about Pérez and Campos-Pons is that they are distanced from Cuban lived reality. They are no longer placed in the same kind of position as their counterparts who still reside in Cuba from which to assess the current issues that are relevant to the inhabitants on island. For both of these artists, their distance from everyday Cuban reality in spatial and ideological terms has affected their constructions of Cuba, their relationships to the island and to the Cuban artistic sphere.

Indeed, as a geographically disparate group of artists, it has been less possible for 1980s generations to have the same kind of dialogical and pedagogical impact from outside Cuba, despite their training to do so. If the generations since the 1990s, including Bruguera and Ramos had decided to leave Cuba as their 1980s colleagues such as Campos-Pons and Pérez did, their artistic perspectives would also be affected. They may have gained access to many things not available in Cuba, but they would not be placed in positions from which to produce art with so much relevance to the contemporary situation on island.

However, expanding opportunities since the 1990s for artists to study, live and exhibit overseas have enhanced and developed these artist's lives and creative endeavours in many ways ranging from the philosophical and psychological, to the technical and artistic, as well as potential audiences available to them. For Bruguera and to a lesser degree for Ramos, their art has grown out of their life experiences abroad. They have been able to gain exposure to other socio-political and cultural contexts, which has increased the parameters of their ideological and critical consciousness in relation to the situation in Cuba.

Even though ideological, pedagogical and economic problems have beset the Cuban art spectrum as part of the wider societal and ideological situation since the beginning of the 1990s, the art system has continued to nourish artists whose work is eclectic, innovative and socially relevant. This in itself demonstrates the strength and success of the art system developed under the auspices of *el proceso*. In ideological terms, the artists who have emerged since the 1990s have become the voices of a society torn between its socialist ideals and its lived realities. Survival has probably become the single most

important issue facing all Cubans on island in the current climate, and this has affected the dynamic of the art scene at all levels and emphasised a different focus in art production.

Ramos and Bruguera's artistic creations illustrate this point. Their objectives have been for their art to provide viewpoints regarding the specific processes that have been experienced in Cuba post–1990. They have achieved this through their own critical questions and reasoning, as human beings who have lived through and been affected by all the change and instability. Indeed, the major upheavals in the 1990s have affected the entire Cuban nation and profoundly impacted people's lives, beliefs and the Cuban sensibility, and this is reflected in the art produced on island.

The privileged place the plastic arts field has been afforded within *el proceso* is also an important factor for these women's sense of self-perception. The 'revolutionary elite structure' which culminates with the ISA, in combination with specific socialist ideologies underpinning art production has strengthened the plastic arts spectrum and the role of artists in the post–1959 era. The nature of the plastic arts medium and its perceived societal role has enabled the flourishing of this field within the boundaries of the Cuban revolutionary process, beyond that of other art and cultural forms. This unique phenomenon places certain Cuban artists in special positions.

As well as the discursive ability to be able to comment as artists through the plastic aesthetic medium and their pedagogical impact on future generations, the power inherent in being a certain type of artist also includes the ability to earn foreign currency and to travel, live and study overseas. These factors have developed the potential of the

plastic arts and artists since the 1990s to become influential forces outside of Cuba with increased international status and importance. Contemporary plastic artists and their medium's power and authority resides in the fact that the more achieved outside Cuba, the less able the Cuban government is to control the circulation of Cuban culture beyond its borders.[654] This allows these artists, on and off island, expanded opportunities from increasingly visible positions to think and comment critically about Cuba and related topics and affairs. However, paradoxically so much travel and overseas exposure also distances artists from the country's lived realities, the Cuban art sphere and Cuba as a potential audience and the impact they can make through their art on island.

All the artists in this study now travel in both directions, in and out of Cuba, which has led to the notions of "interior and exterior" becoming increasingly redundant in the Cuban context.[655] Thus there is a poignant sense of searching and of belonging and not belonging in these women's artistic endeavours that reflects the fate and the psyche of the Cuban nation at this important juncture in the country's history. In a sense their art is placed at the borders or limits, historically, ideologically and geographically, and it can be meaningfully read to illuminate and facilitate greater understanding and appreciation of a unique and complex society.

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[654] Coco Fusco, "Cuban Art, Foreign Interests," Catalogue (*Cuba: La Isla Posible*), (Spain: Ediciones Destino, 1995), 253.
[655] Antonio Eligio Fernández, " The Island, the Map, the Traveler. Notes on recent trends in Cuban art," *Cuba — Maps of Desire*, ed. Gerald Matt, trans. Heidemarie Markhardt (Vienna: Folio Verlag, 1999), 22.

Illustrations

Figure.1 — Víctor Patricio Landaluze, *La mulata y el bodeguero*, second half-nineteenth century, oil on canvas, 36 x 28 cm, Private Collection, Miami, U.S.

Figure.2 — Víctor Manual García, *Gitana en el bosque*, S.F., oil on canvas, 61 x 45 cm, Collection of Jorge and Elvira Pupo, Coral Gables, Florida, U.S.

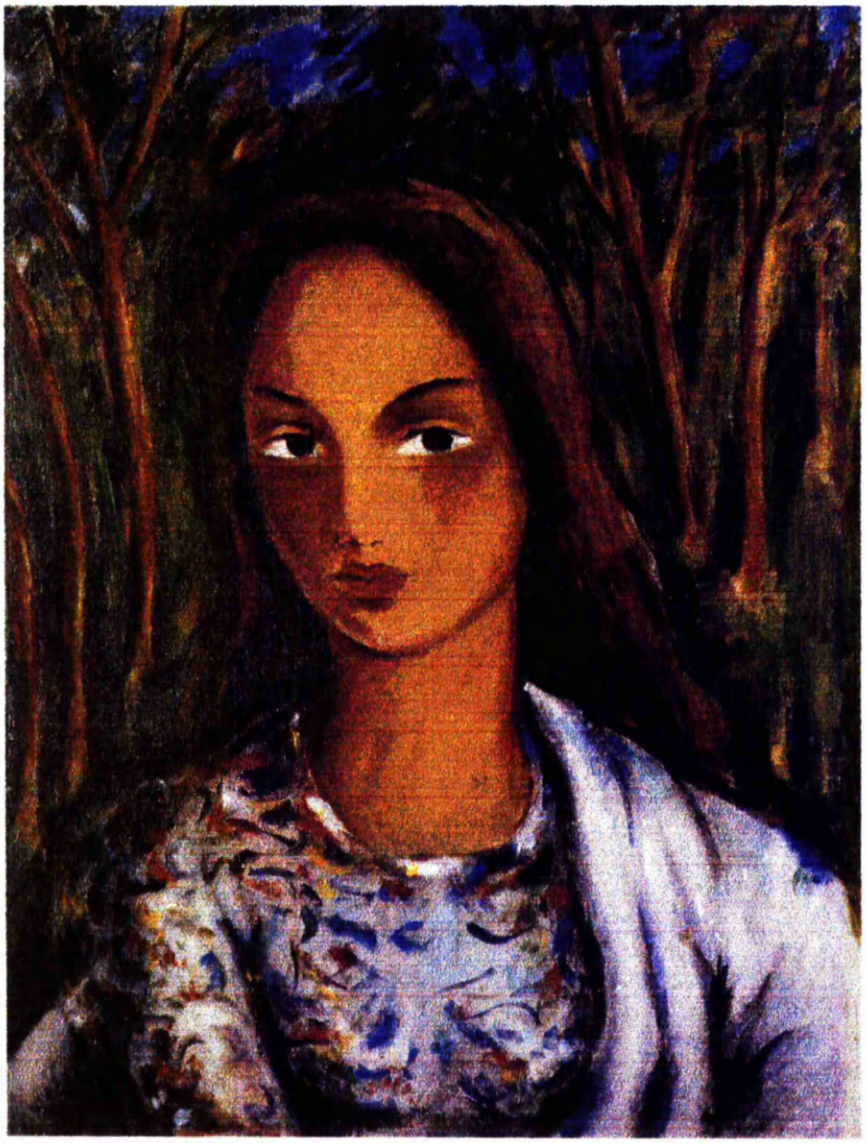
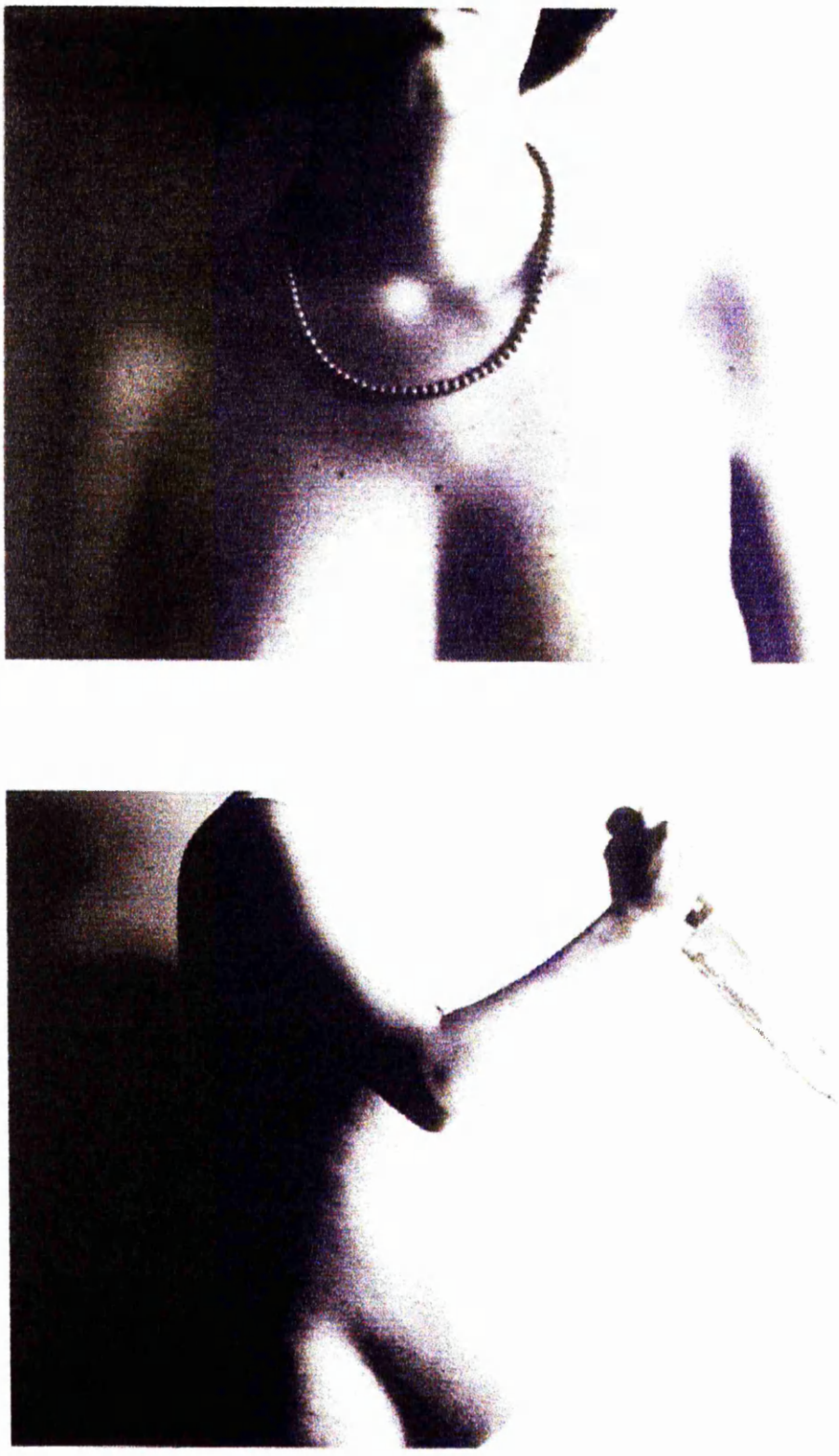
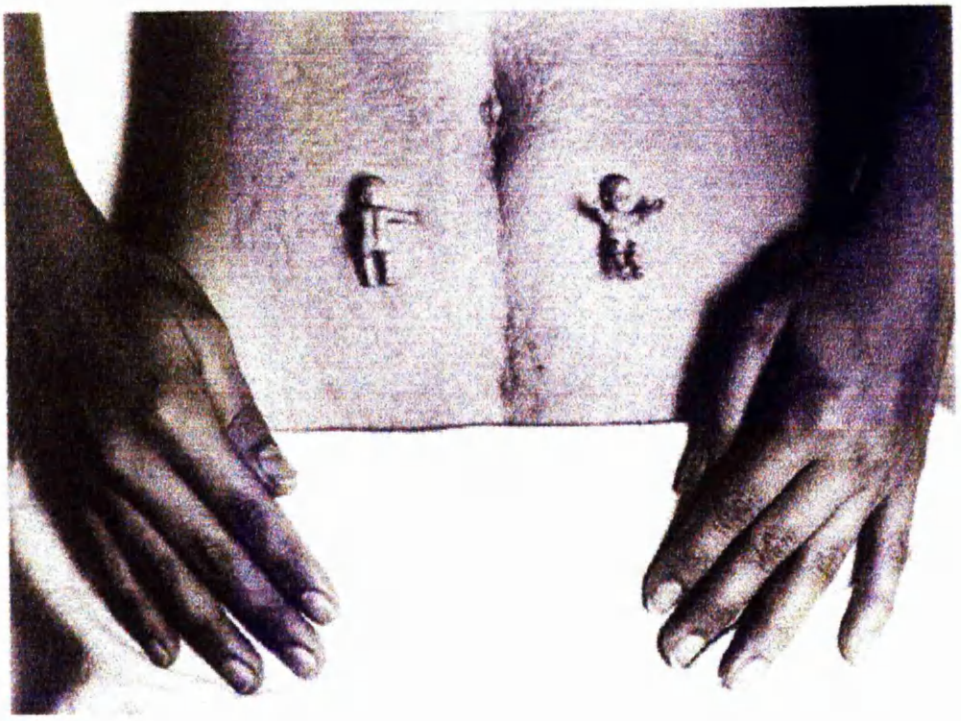


Figure.3 — Marta María Pérez, *Para concebir* I, II, III, IV,V, 1985-6, silver gelatin prints, 40 x 50 cm, courtesy of the Galería Luis Adelantado, Valencia, Spain.





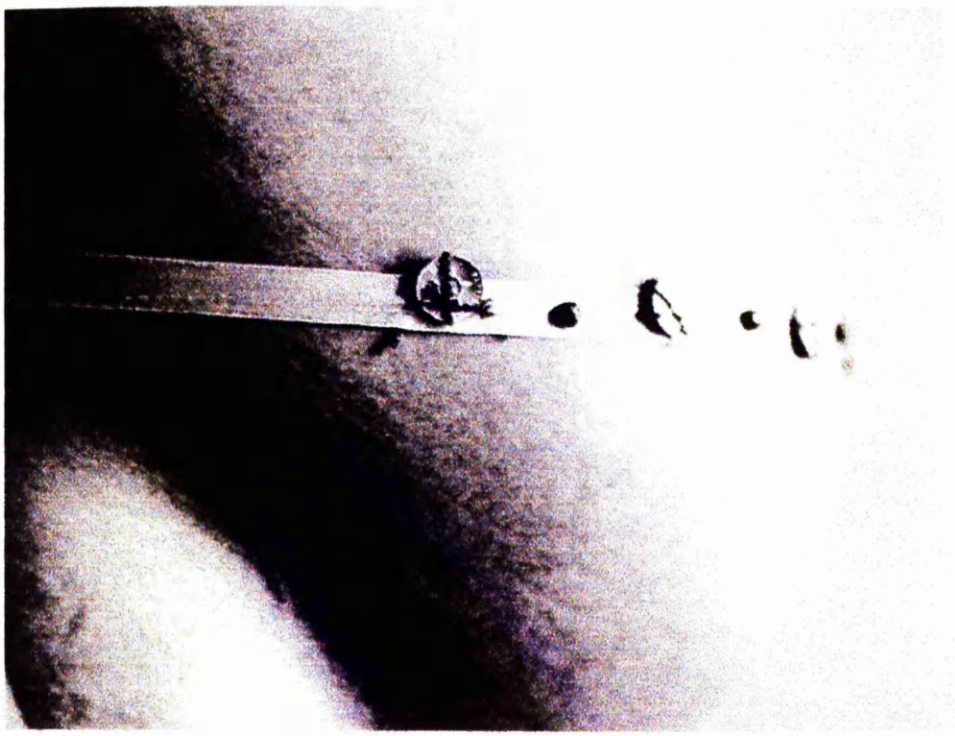


Figure.4 — Marta María Pérez, C*ultos paralelos* (*Altar de Ibeyis*), 1990, silver gelatin prints, 50 x 40 cm, Collection of the artist. Photos: Jo-Ann van Eijck

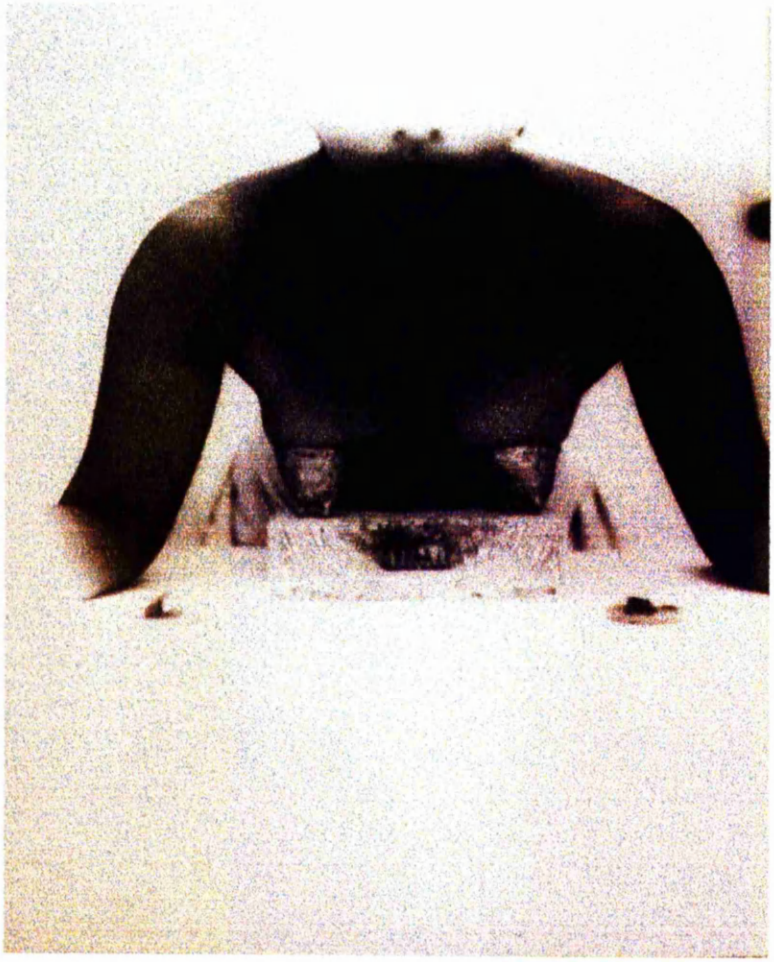


Figure.4a

Figure.5 — Marta María Pérez, *Quiero por techo el cielo*, 1995, silver gelatin print, 100 x 80 cm, courtesy of the Galería Luis Adelantado, Valencia, Spain

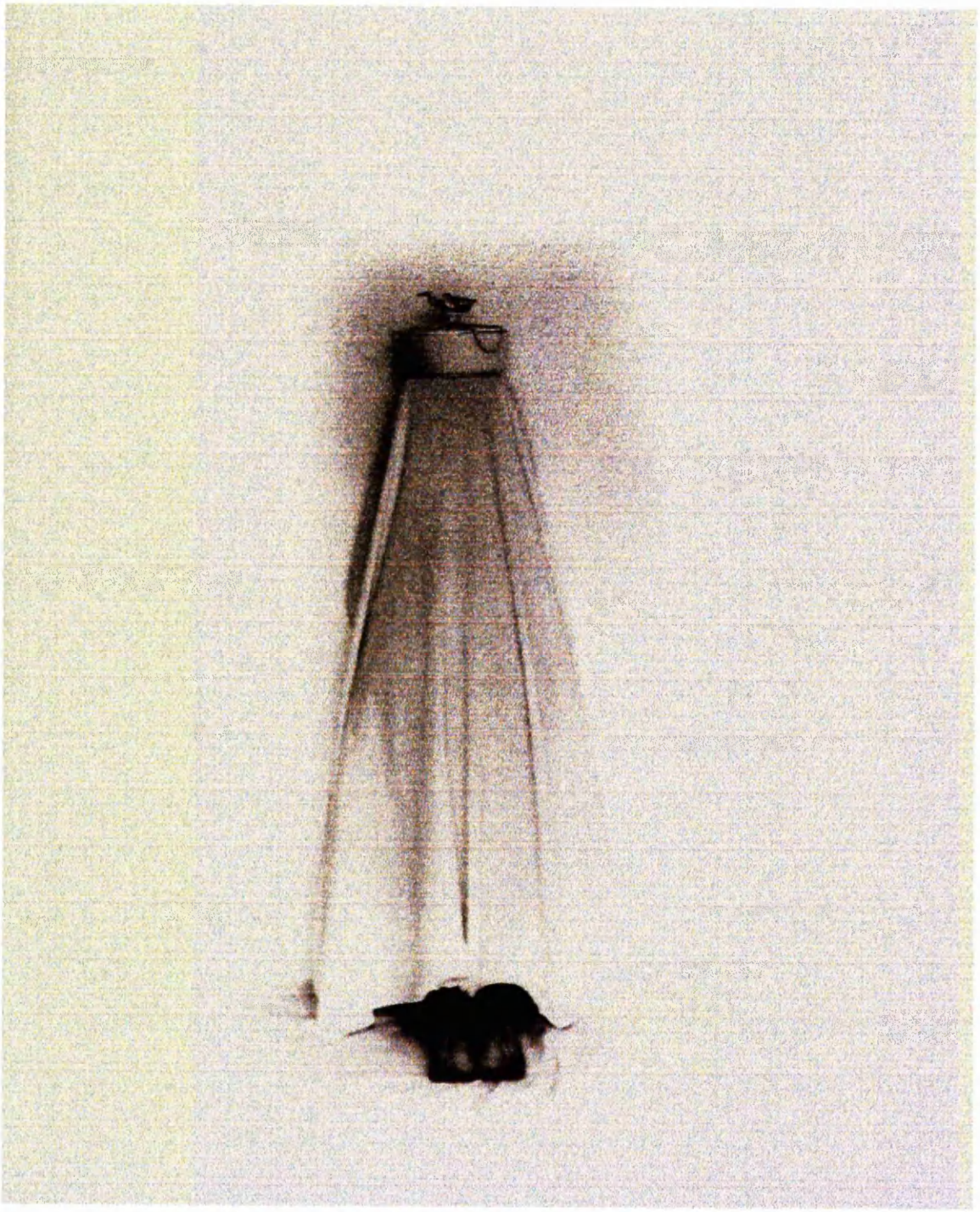


Figure.6 — Marta María Pérez, *Recibe ofrendas*, 1992, silver gelatin print, 40 x 50 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck

Figure.7 — Marta María Pérez, *Protección*, 1990, silver gelatin print, 150 x 122 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck

Figure.8 — Marta María Pérez, *Otán*, 1995, silver gelatin print, 50 x 40 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Galería Luis Adelantado, Valencia, Spain.

Figure.9 — Marta María Pérez, *Macuto,* 1991, silver gelatin print, 40 x 50 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

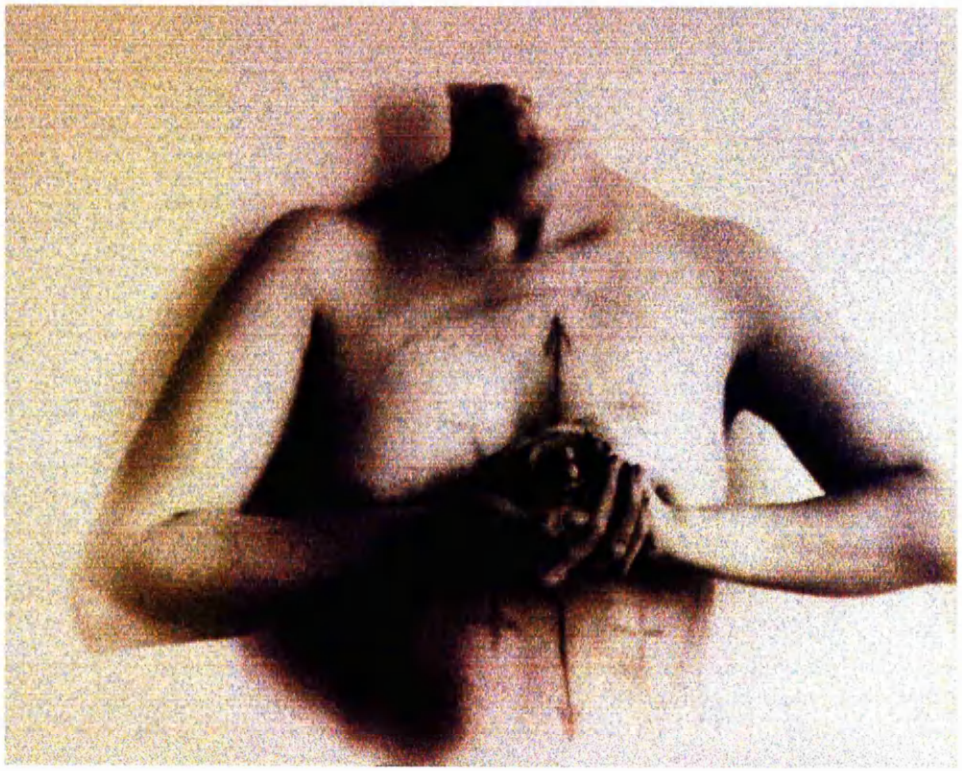


Figure.10 — Marta María Pérez, *Caminos*, 1990, silver gelatin print, 50 x 40 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

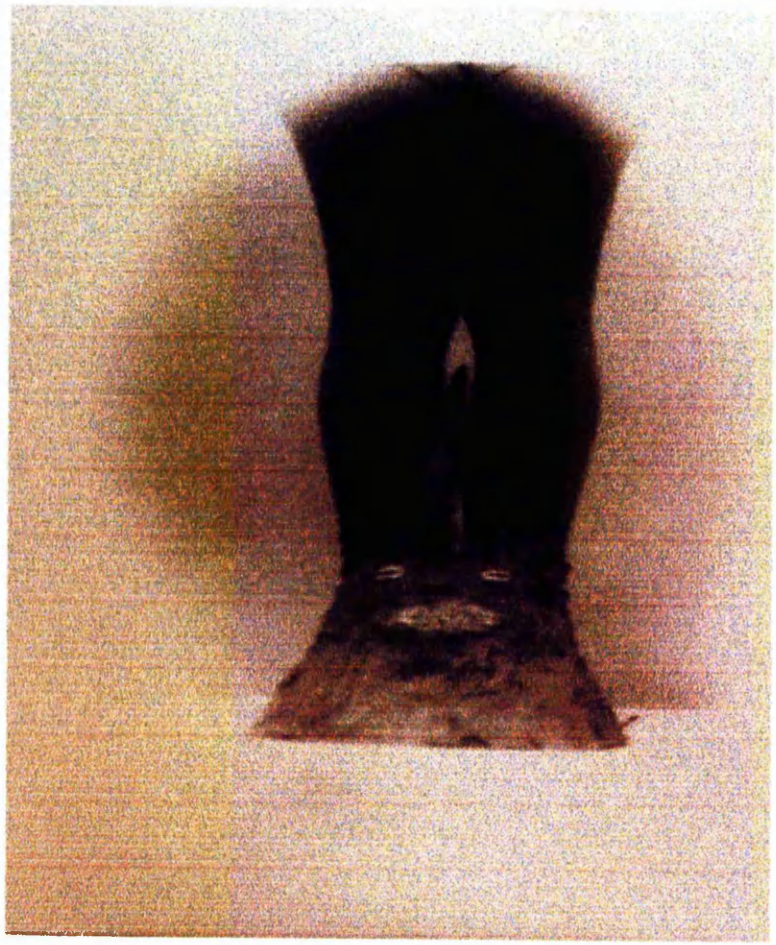


Figure.10a — Marta María Pérez, *Caminos*, 1990, silver gelatin print, 50 x 40 cm, courtesy of Throckmorton Fine Art Inc., New York, U.S.

Figure.11 — Marta María Pérez, *Tiene la llave del destino*, 1992, silver gelatin print, 150 x 122 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Figure.12 — Marta María Pérez, *Esta en tus manos*, 1995, silver gelatin print, 50 x 40 cm, courtesy of the Galería Luis Adelantado, Valencia, Spain.

Figure.13 — Marta María Pérez, *No zozobra la barca de la vida*, 1995, silver gelatin print, 150 x 122 cm, courtesy of the Galería Luis Adelantado, Valencia, Spain.

Figure.14 — Marta María Pérez, *Osain*, 1994, silver gelatin print, 100 x 80 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Figure.15 — Marta María Pérez, *Amuleto*, ca. 1987, silver gelatin print, 50 x 40 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Figure.16 — Marta María Pérez, *Ya no hay corazon*, 1999, silver gelatin print, 50 x 40 cm, Collection of Luis Adelantado and Ramis Barquet Gallery, New York, U.S. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Figure.17 — Marta María Pérez, *No vi con mis propios ojos*, 1995, silver gelatin print, 50 x 40 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

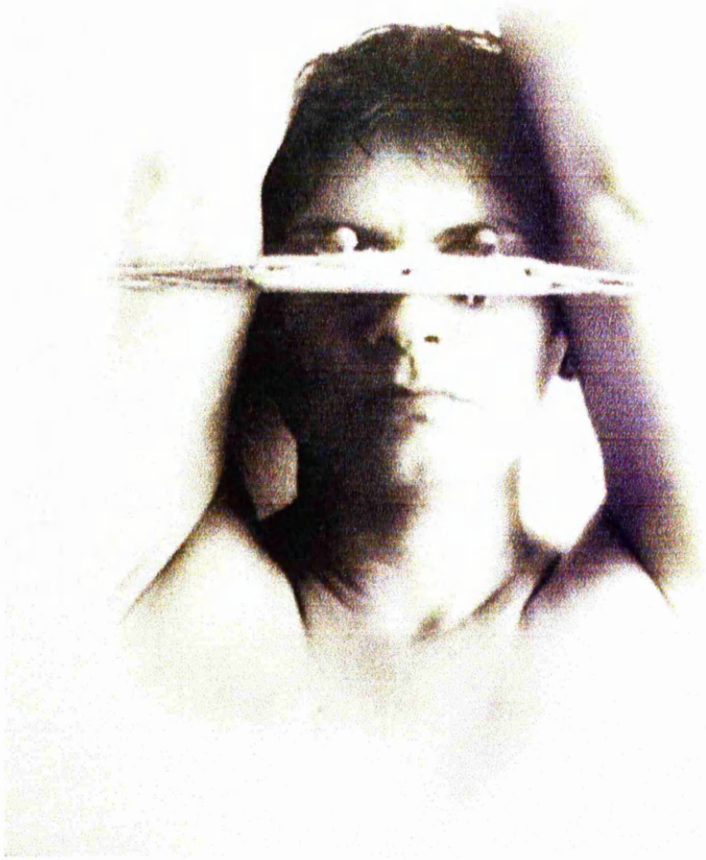


Figure.18 — Marta María Pérez, *Tres Iyawós*, 1992, silver gelatin print, 120 x 150 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Figure.19 — Belkis Ayón, *Sin título*, 1993, collography, 94,4 x 62 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Figure.20 — Belkis Ayón, *Arrepentida*, 1993, collography, 94 x 67,5 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Figure.21 — Belkis Ayón, *La sentencia*, 1993, collography, 94 x 68 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

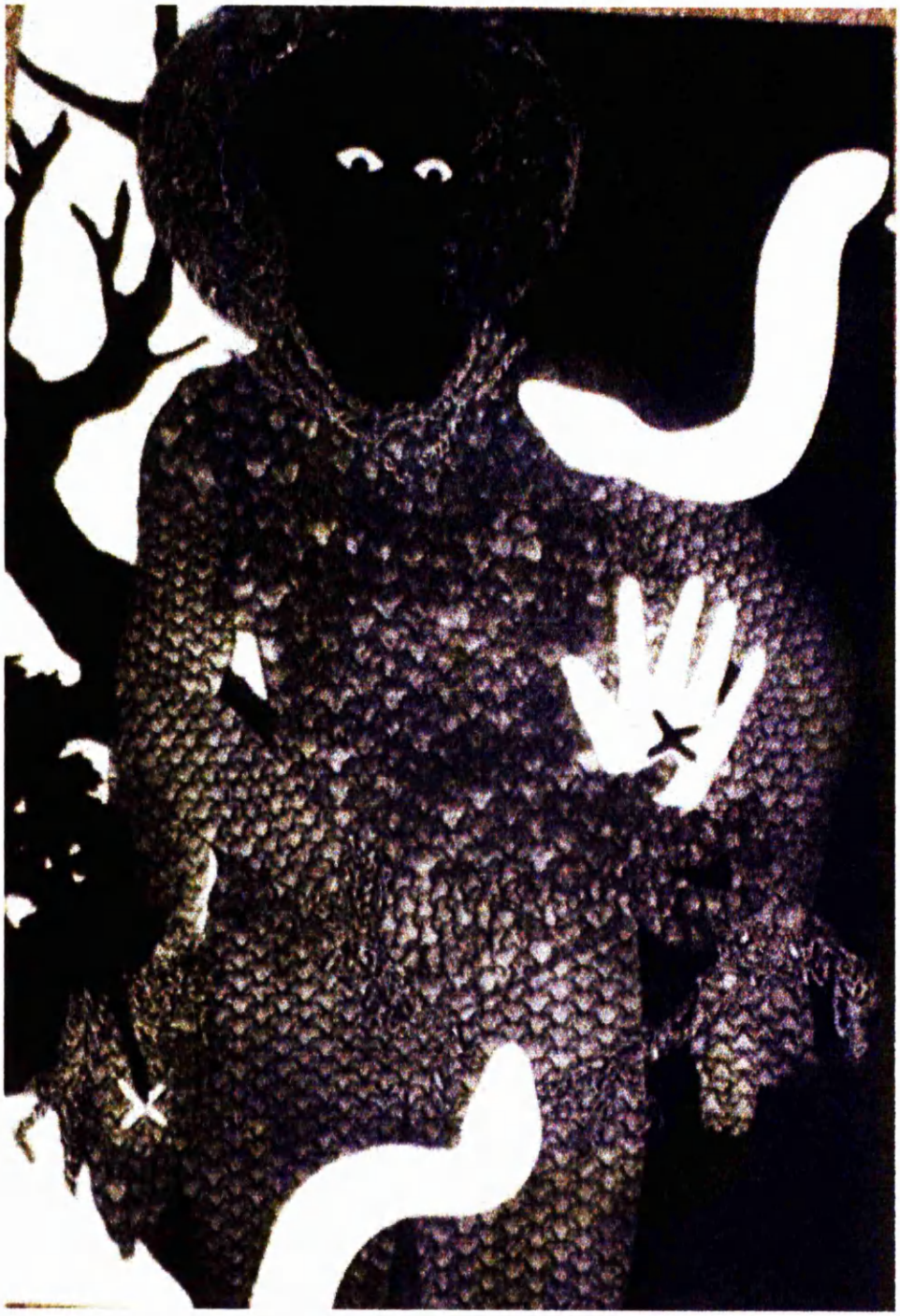
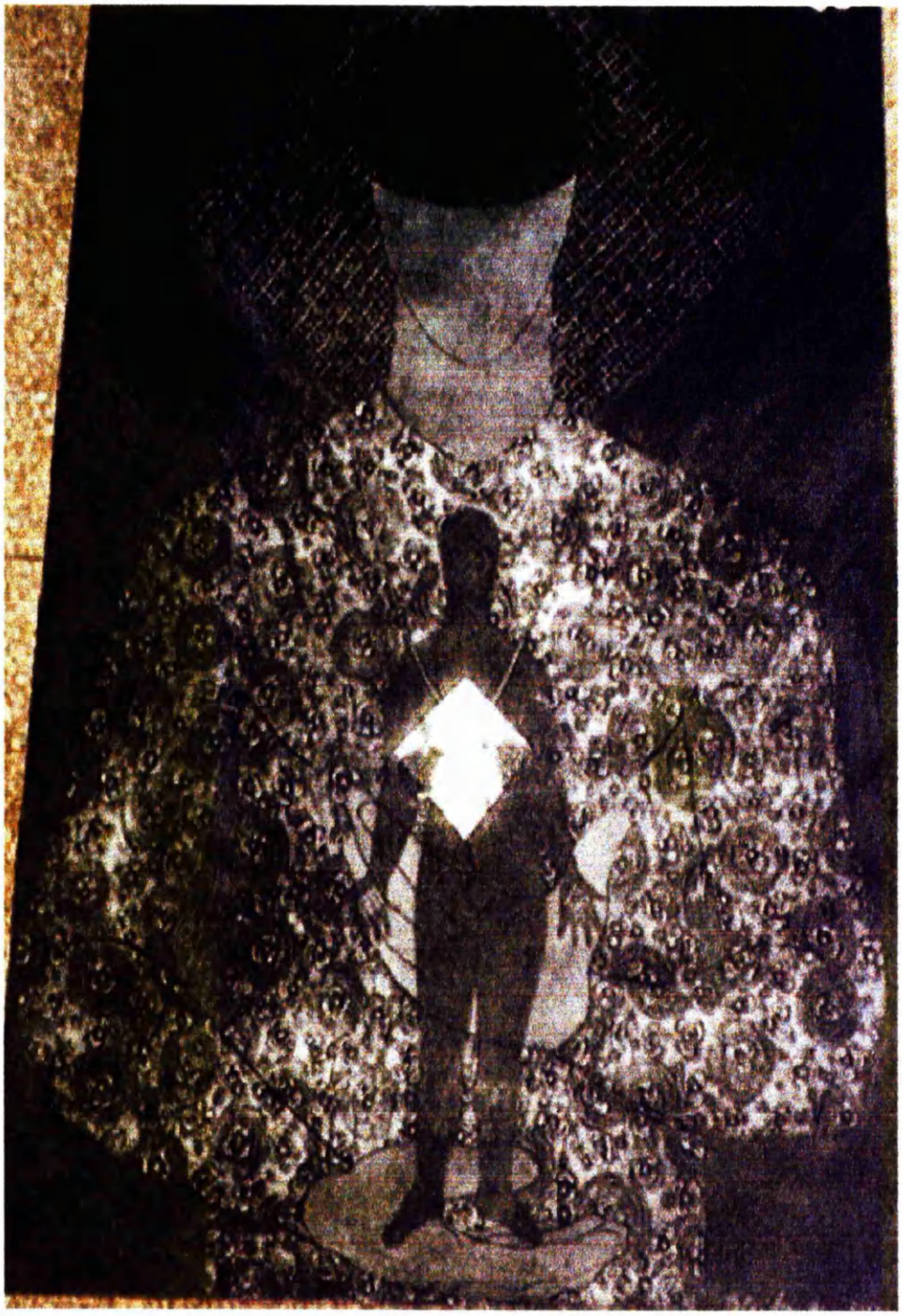


Figure.22 — Belkis Ayón, *Sin título*, 1993, collography, 72,8 x 94,5 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Figure.23 — Belkis Ayón, *Sin título*, 1993, collography, 94 x 68,5 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.



Detail

Figure.24 — *Anaforuana firmas*, included in the book *Los Ñañigos*, by Enrique Sosa Rodríguez.

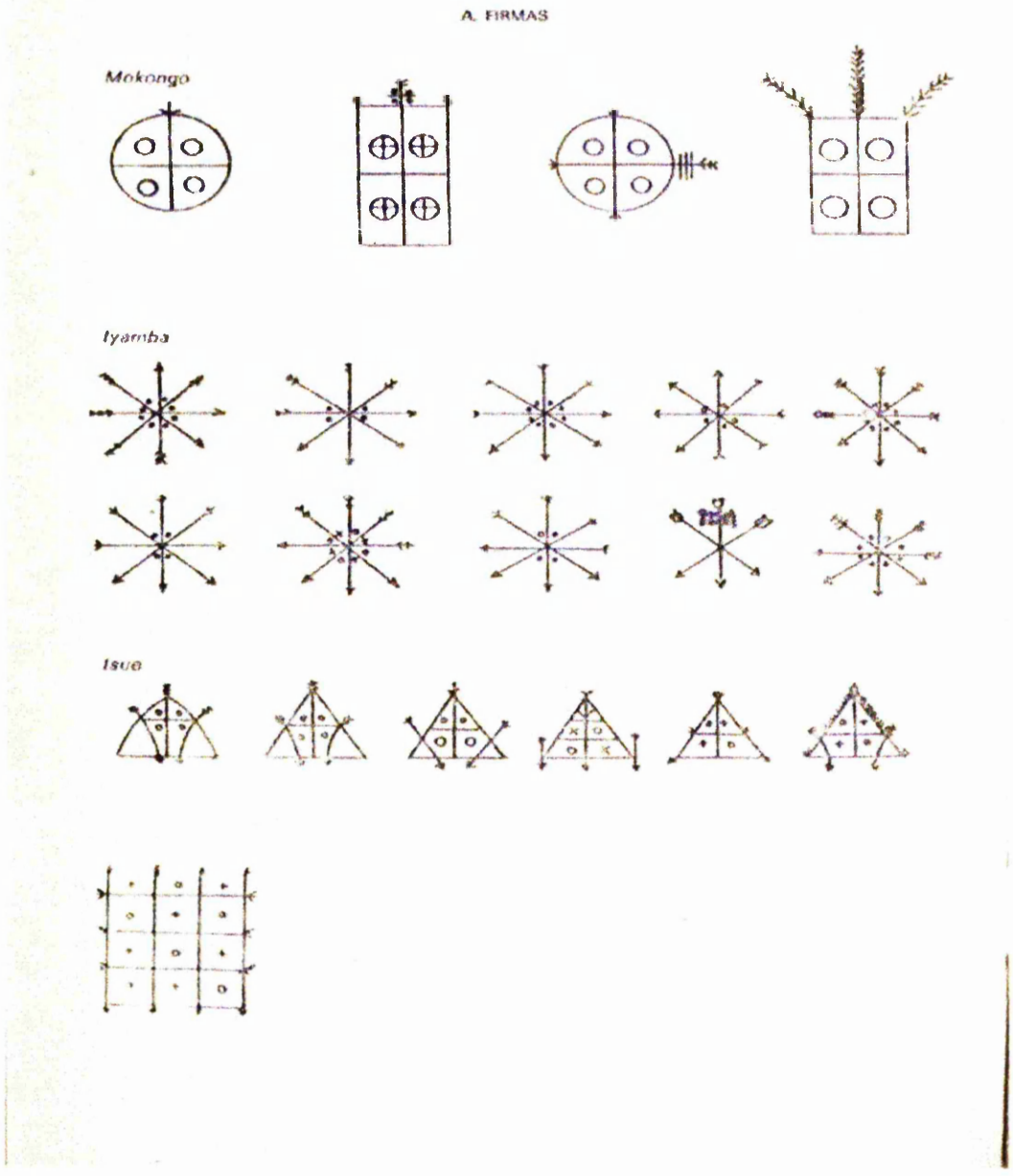


Figure.25 — *Anaforuana* signos, included in the book *Los Ñañigos*, by Enrique Sosa Rodríguez.

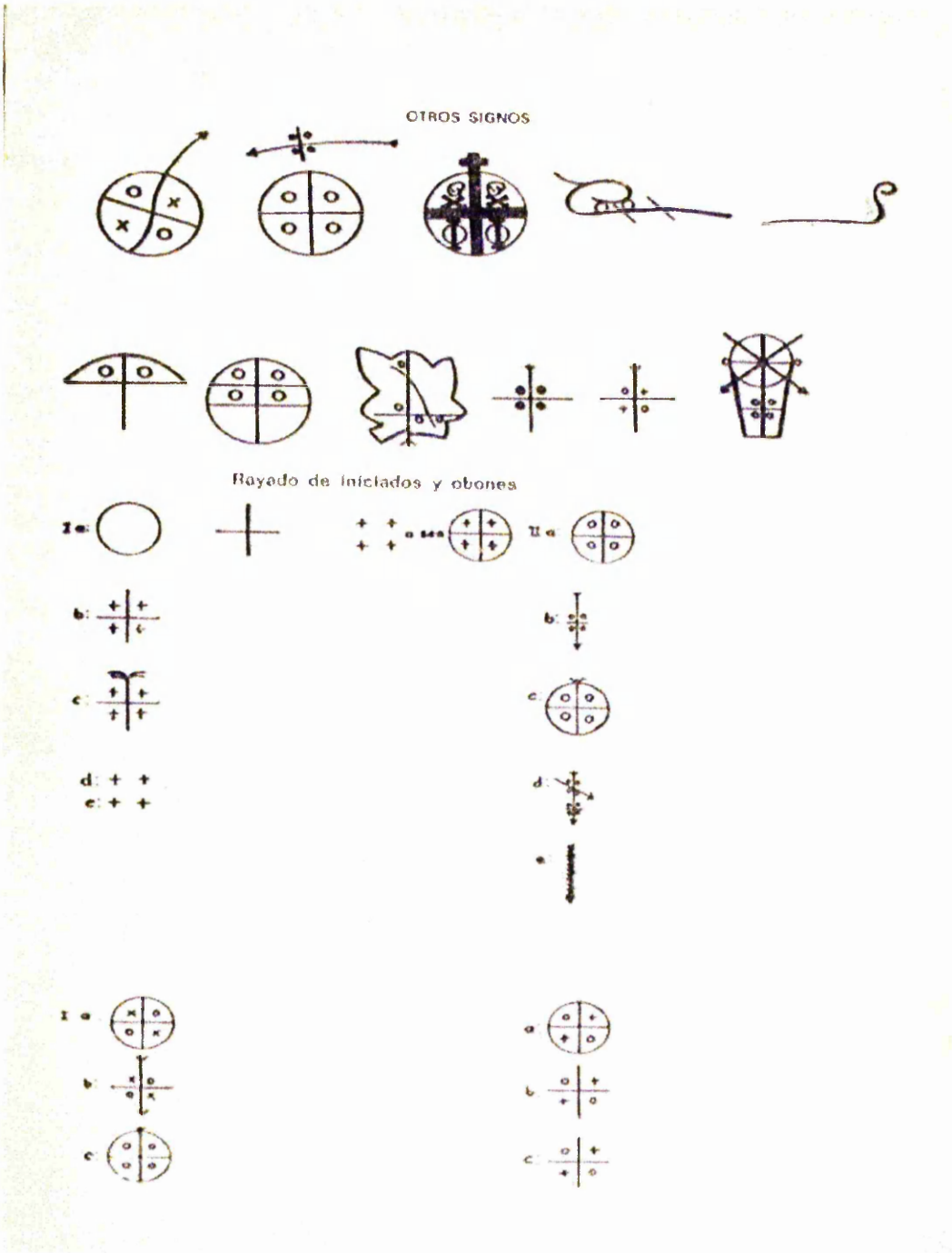


Figure.26 — Belkis Ayón, *Sin título*, 1993, collography, 89 x 70,8 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Detail

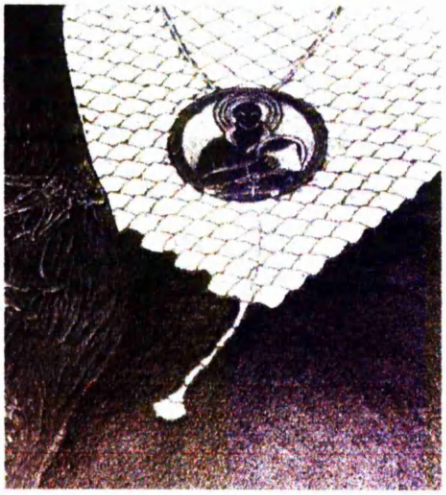


Figure.27 — Belkis Ayón, *Mi alma y yo te queremos*, 1993, collography, 89 x 71,2 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

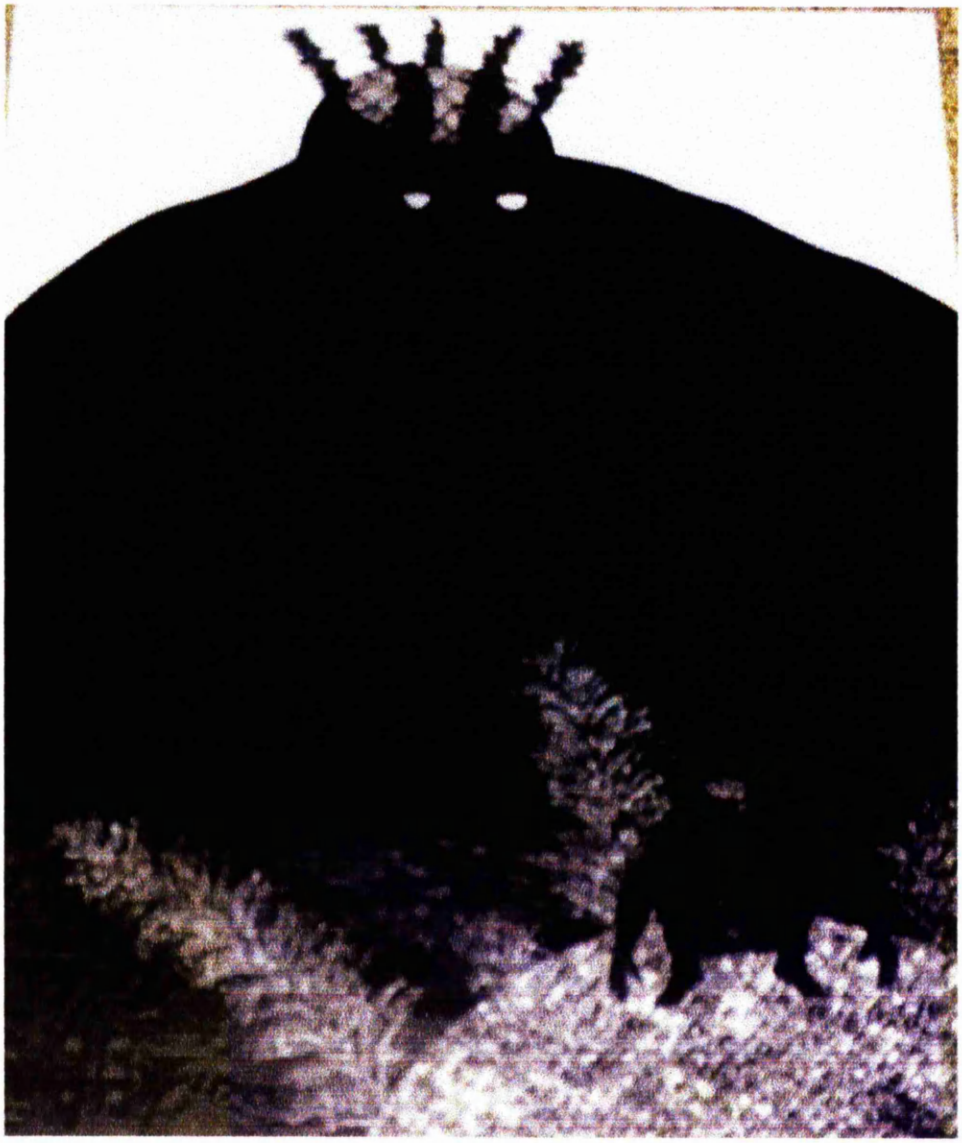
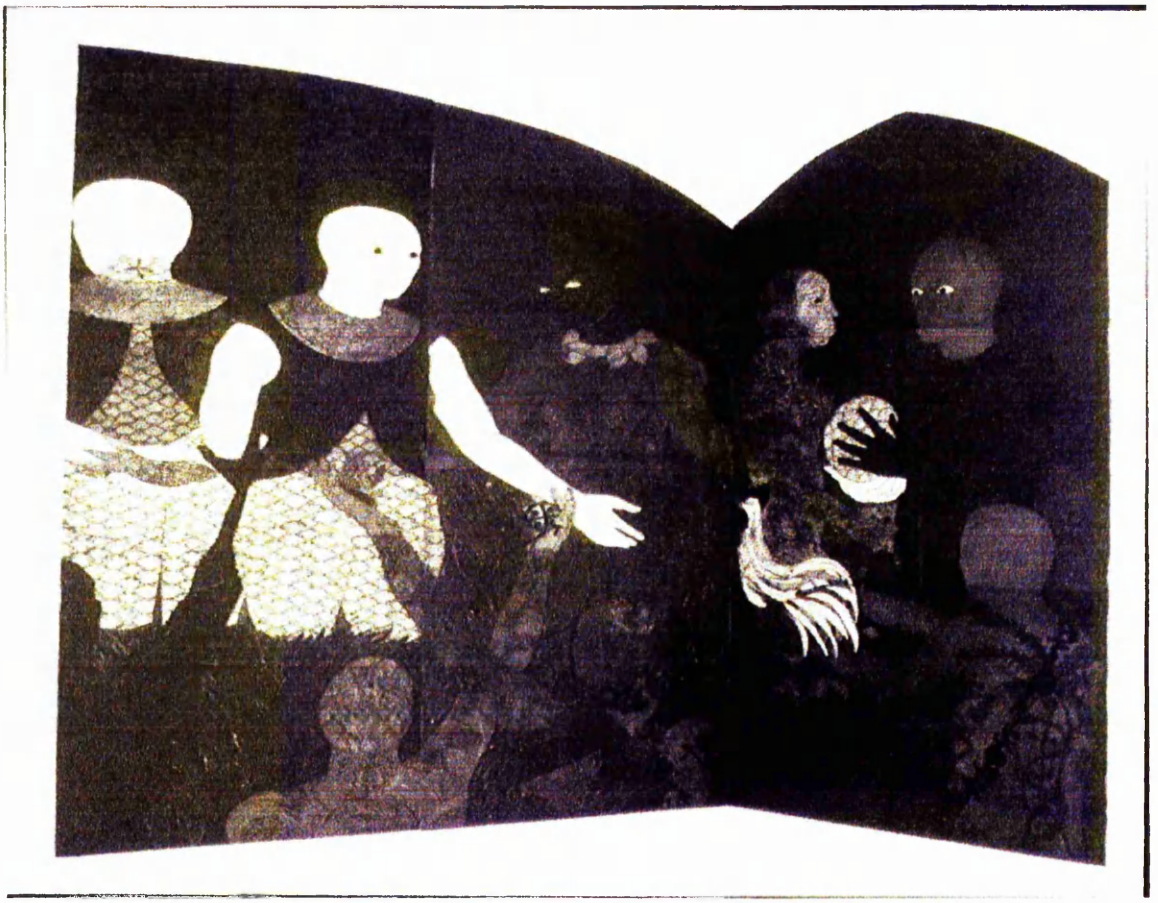


Figure.28 — Belkis Ayón, *Perfidia,* 1998, collograph, 200 x 251,5 cm (7 Parts), Collection of the artist. Exhibition: Trabajando Pa'l Ingle, Barbican Arts Centre, London, UK, 1999. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.



Detail

Figure.28a — *Resurección*, 1998, collograph, 263 x 212 cm (9 Parts), Collection of the artist. Exhibition: Trabajando Pa'l Ingle, Barbican Arts Centre, London, UK, 1999. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

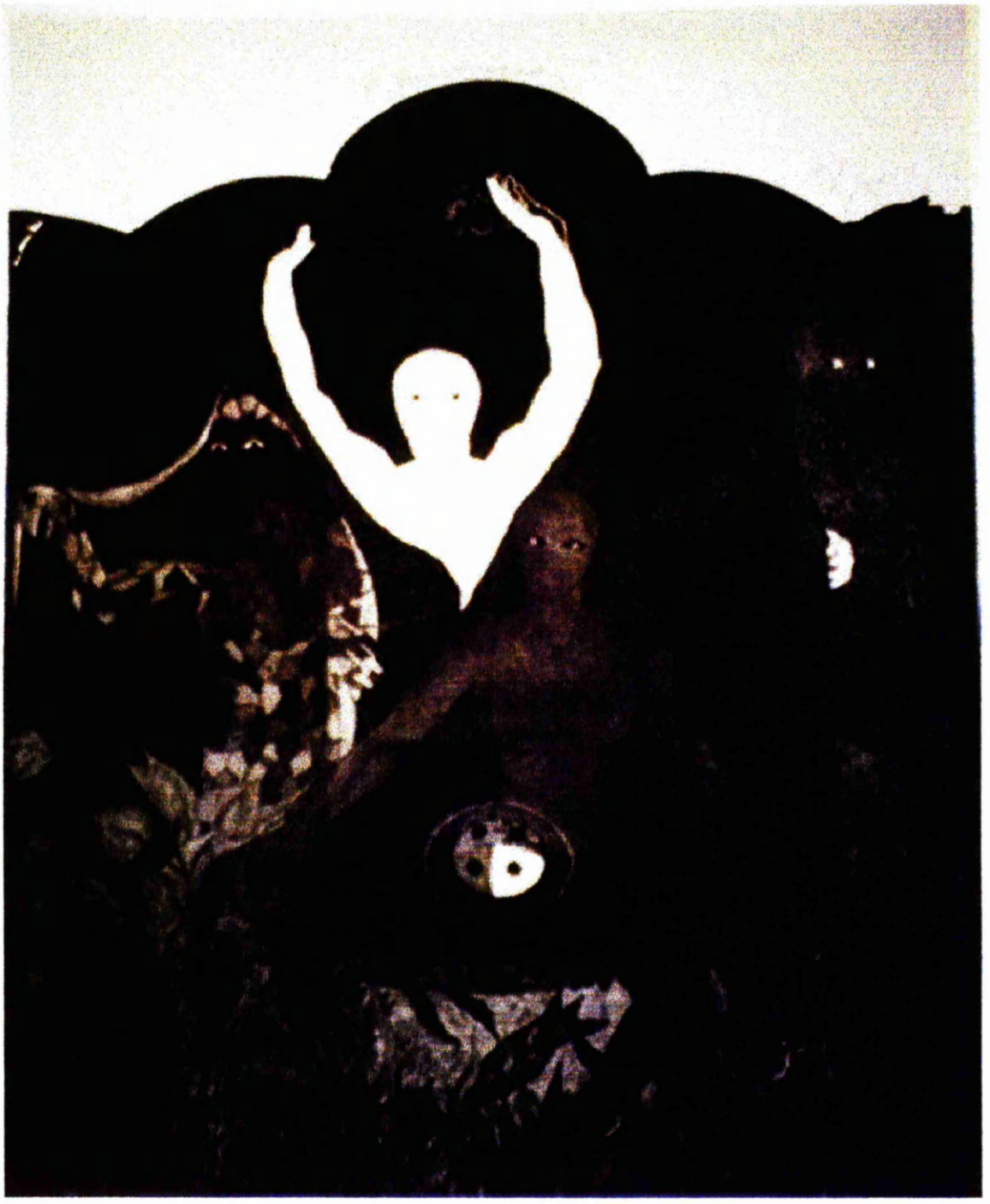
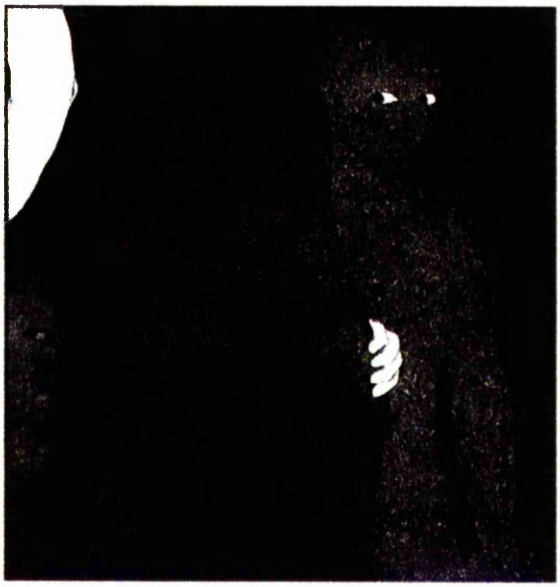


Figure. 28a — Details

I

II



III

Figure.28b — *Desobendencia*, 1998, collograph, 280 x 200 cm (8 Parts), Collection of the artist. Exhibition: Trabajando Pa'l Ingle, Barbican Arts Centre, London, UK, 1999. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Figure.28b — Detail

Figure.29 — Sikáneka *firmas*, included in the book *Los Ñañigos*, by Enrique Sosa Rodríguez.

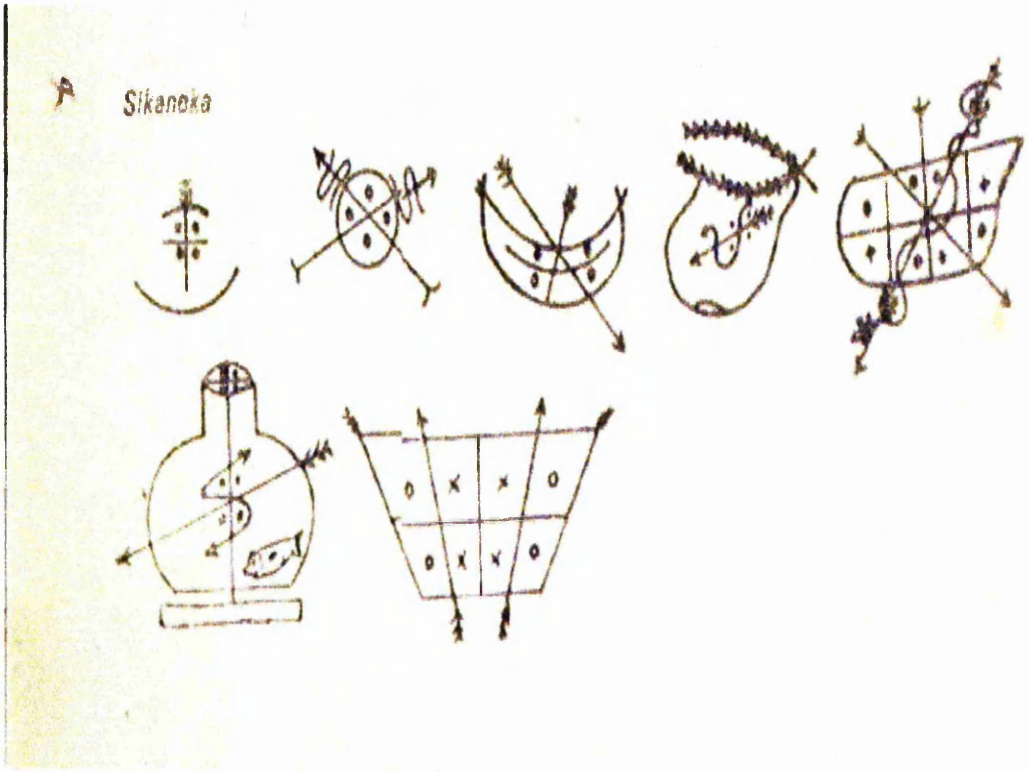


Figure.30 — Belkis Ayón, *Sin Título*, 1993, collography, 89 x 70,3 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

Figure.31 — Nasakó *firmas*, included in the book *Los Ñañigos*, by Enrique Sosa Rodríguez.

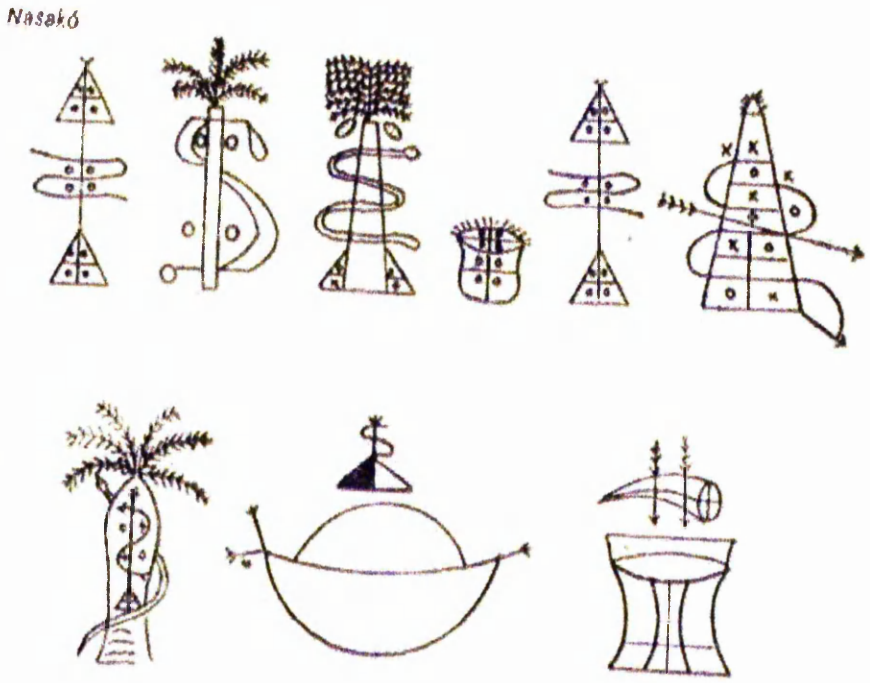


Figure.32 — Anamangüi *firmas*, included in the book *Los Ñañigos*, by Enrique Sosa Rodríguez.

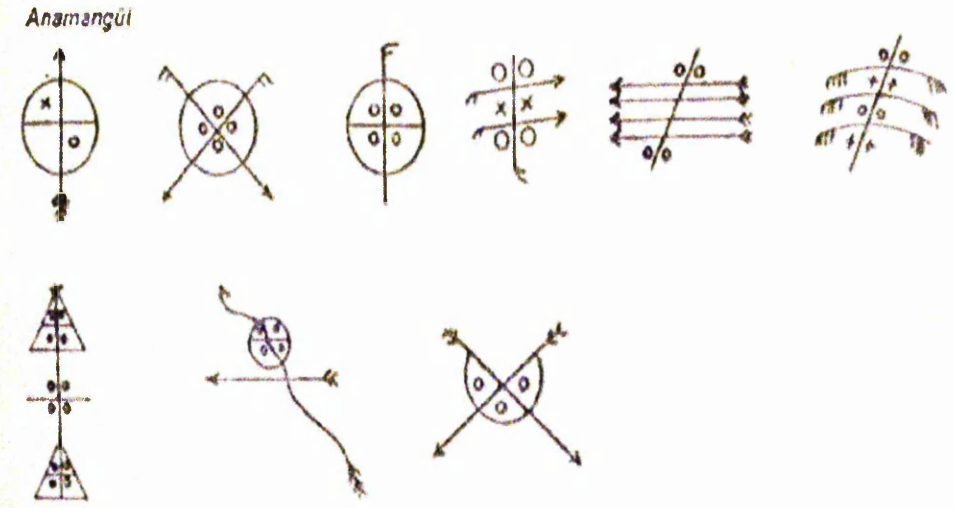


Figure.33 — Neophyte *rayados*, included in the book *La Sociedad Secreta Abakuá*, p.178-179, by Lydia Cabrera.

El Obonekue después de consagrado Indibón.

Figure.34 — *Altar de Nyéguéye*, included in the book *Los Ñañigos*, by Enrique Sosa Rodriguez.

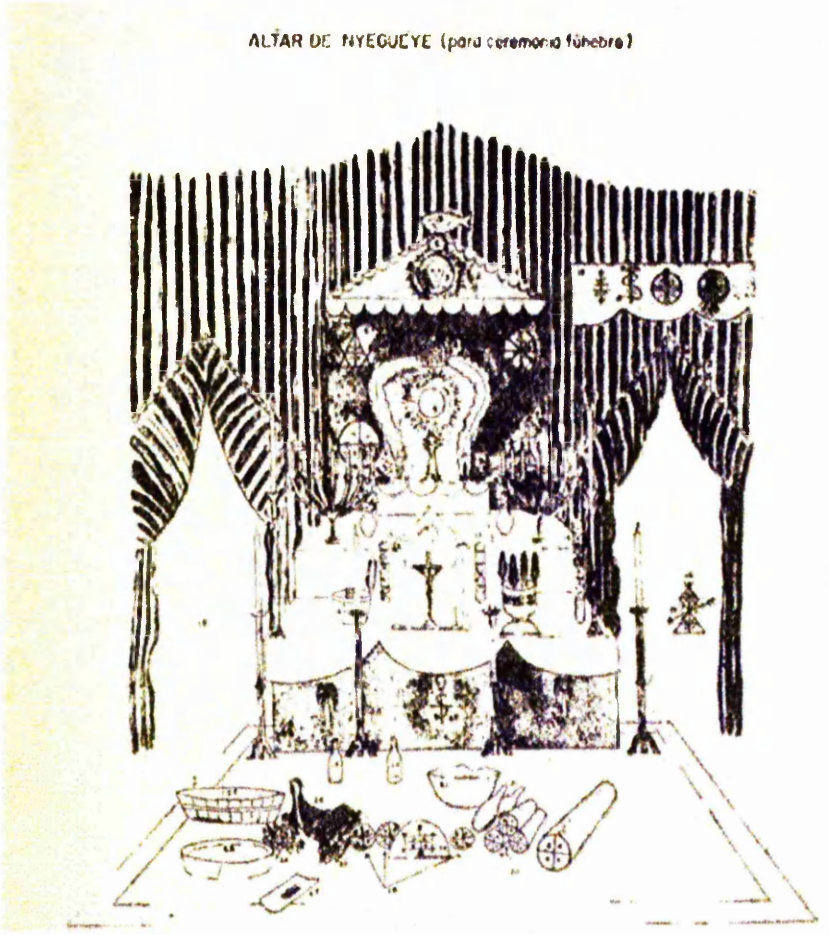


Figure.35 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Cinturón de castidad*, 1985, spp on canvas on hardboard, 350 x 350 cm, Collection of the Centro de Desarrollo des Artes Visuales, Havana, Cuba.

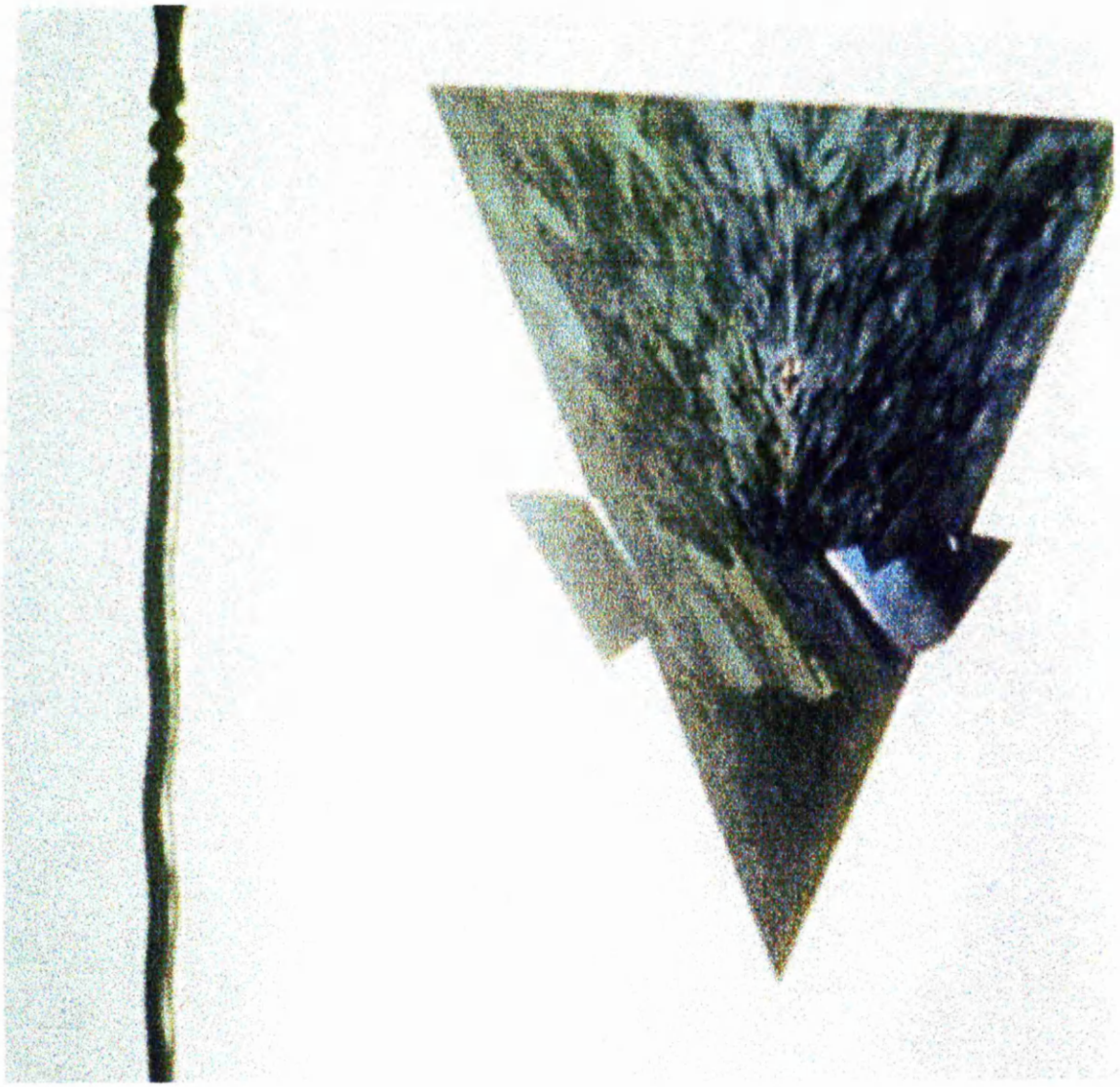


Figure.36 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Anti-Conceptivo*, 1987, acrylic on canvas, 350 x 350 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Luis Camnitzer.

Figure.37 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, "*When I am Not Here, Estoy Alla*: Triptych Number 2 — Image 1," 1996, Polaroid, 50,8 x 61 cm, Private Collection.

Figure.37a — Magdalena Campos-Pons, "*When I am Not Here, Estoy Alla*: Triptych Number 1— Image 1," 1996, Polaroid, 50,8 x 61 cm, courtesy of The Franklin H Williams Caribbean Cultural Center, African Diaspora Institute, New York, U.S.

Figure.38 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Abridor de Caminos*, 1996, Three Polaroid's, 50,8 x 61 cm (each), Private Collection.

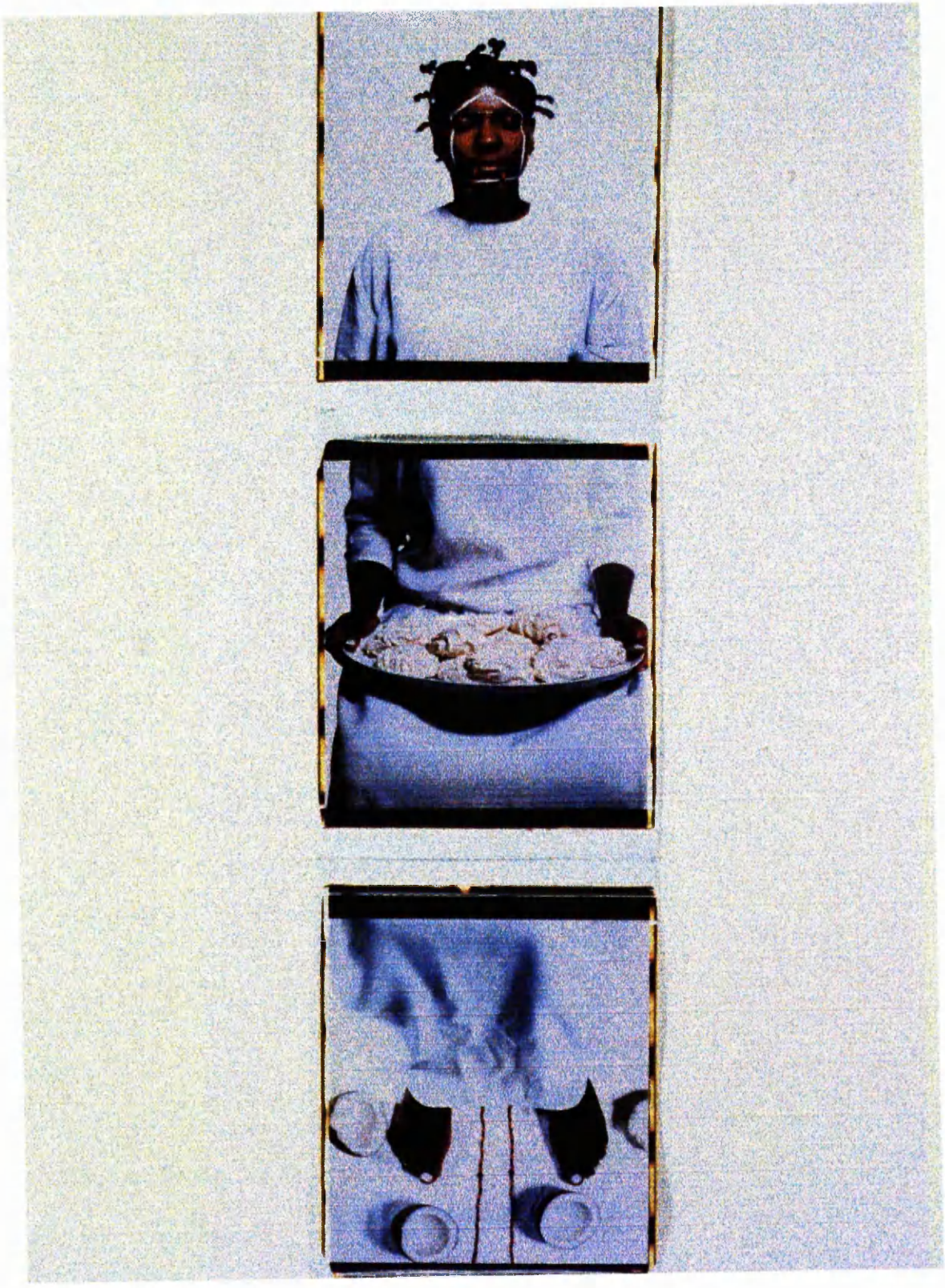


Figure.39 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Umbilical Cord*, 1991, installation: mixed media, Collection of the National Museum of African Artists, Boston, U.S, courtesy of the artist.

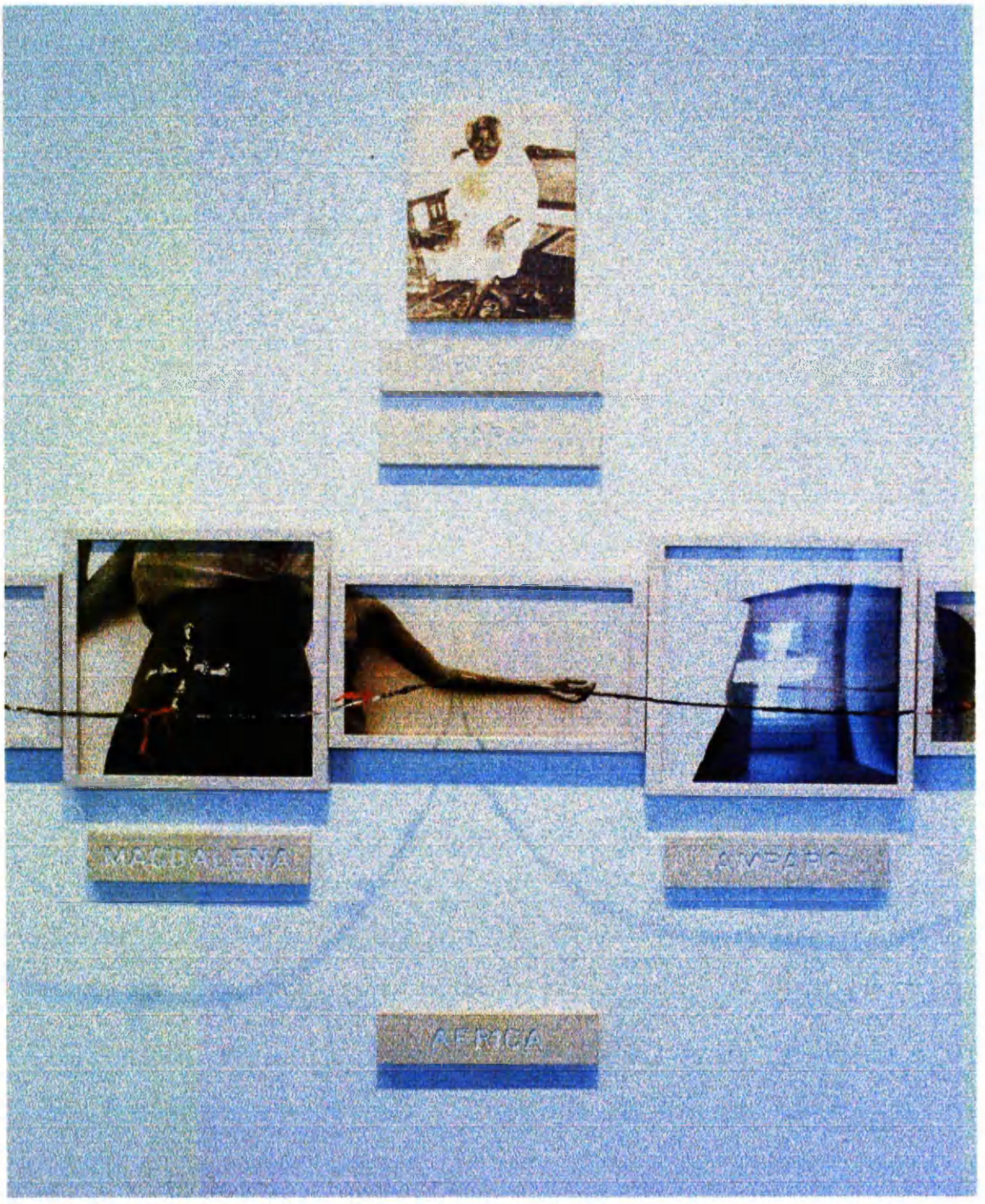


Figure.40 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *A Town Portrait: Memory Streams* from the series *History of People who were not Heroes*, 1993, installation: fused glass, copper, clay, steel, and three video tracks, created for the Mary Ingraham Bunting Institute, Cambridge, Massachusetts, U.S, courtesy of the artist.

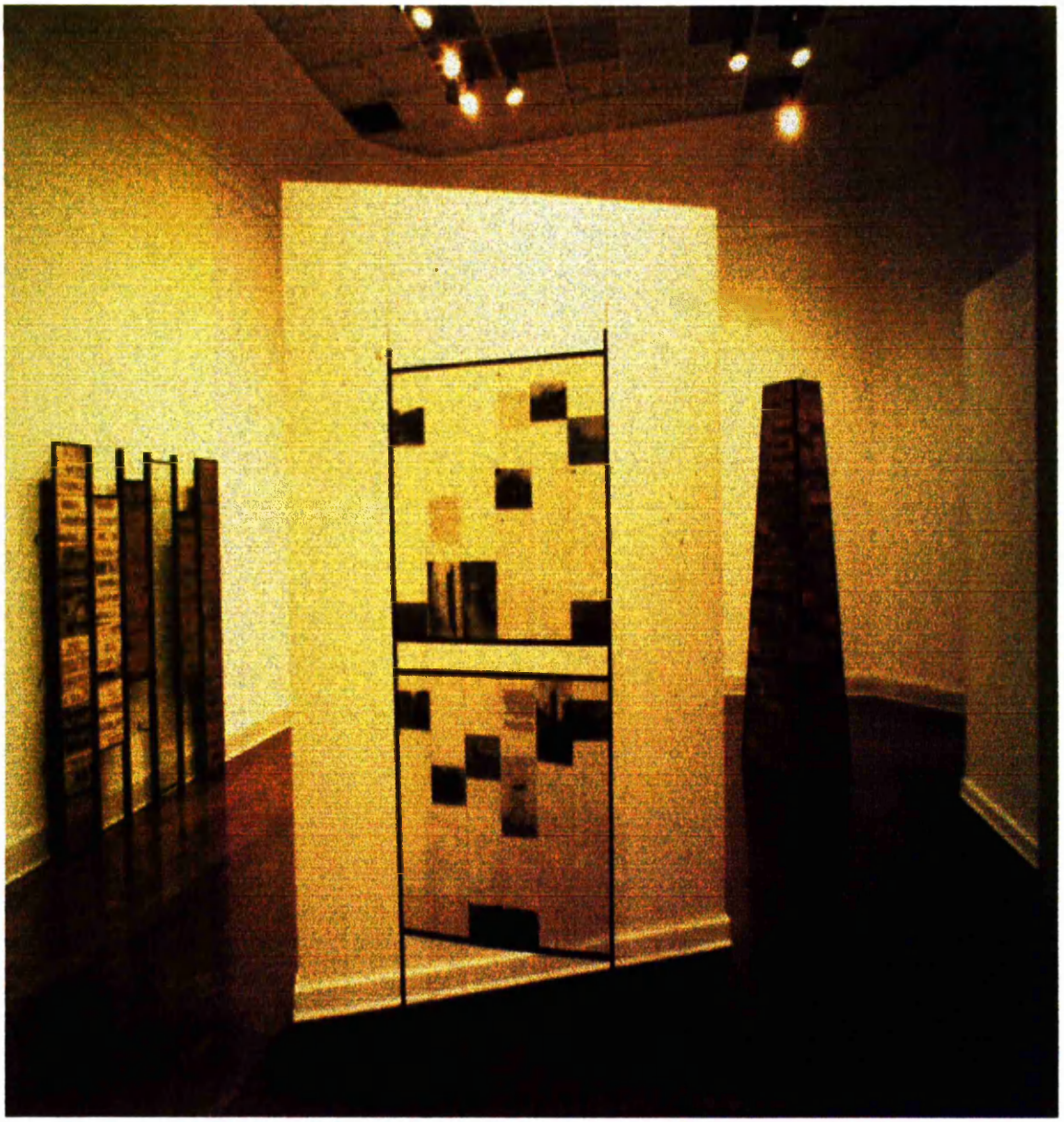


Figure.40 — Details

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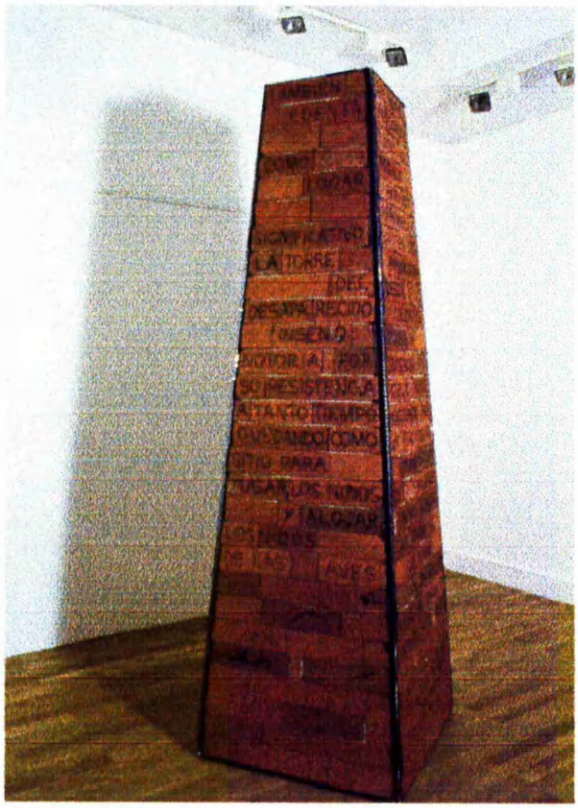


II

Figure.41 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Spoken Softly with Mama* from the series *History of People who were not Heroes*, 1998, installation: embroidered silk and organza, cotton, photographic transfers, cast glass, boards, six video tracks, stereo sound, Collection of The National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Canada, courtesy of the artist.

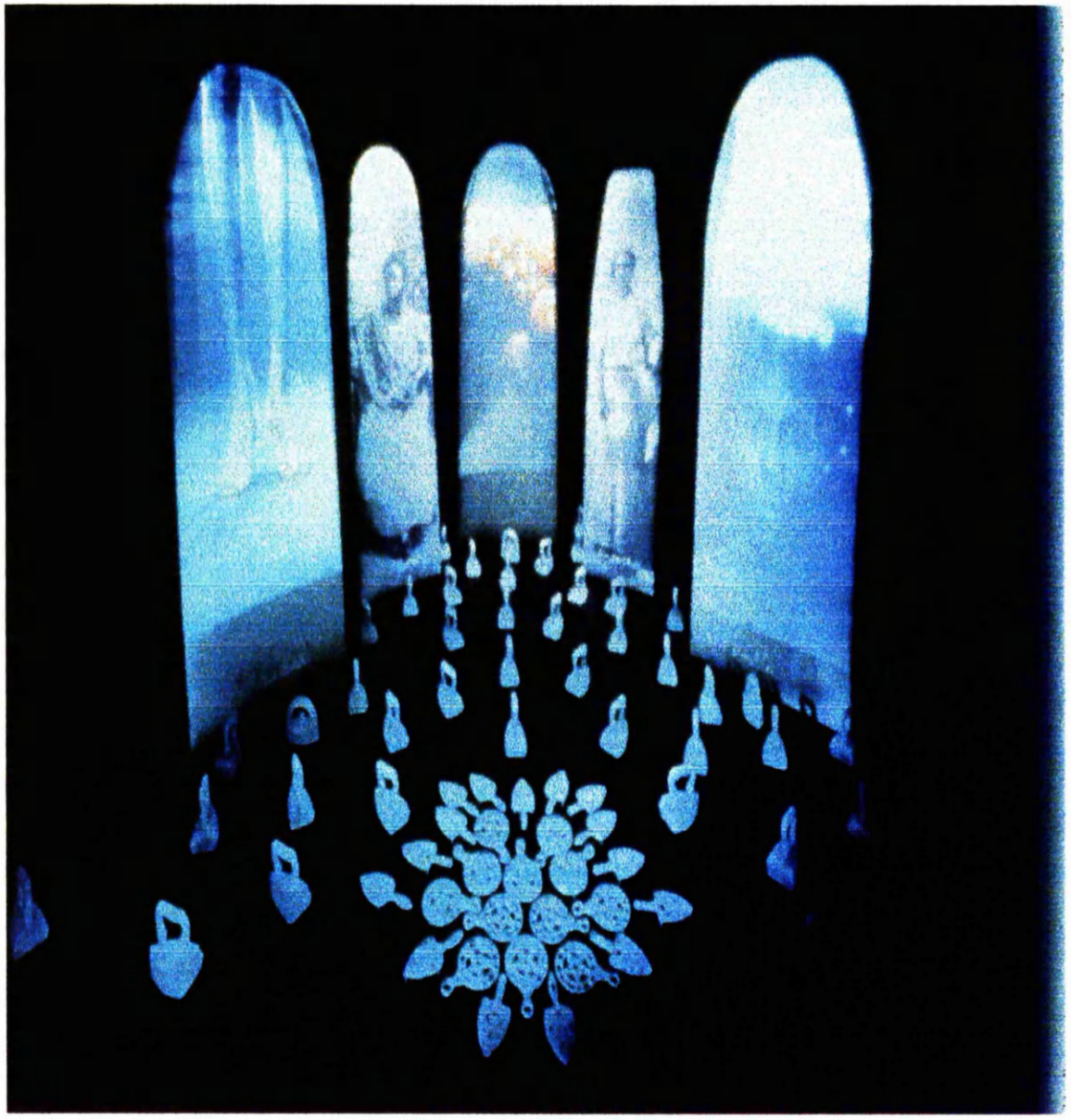


Figure.41 — Detail

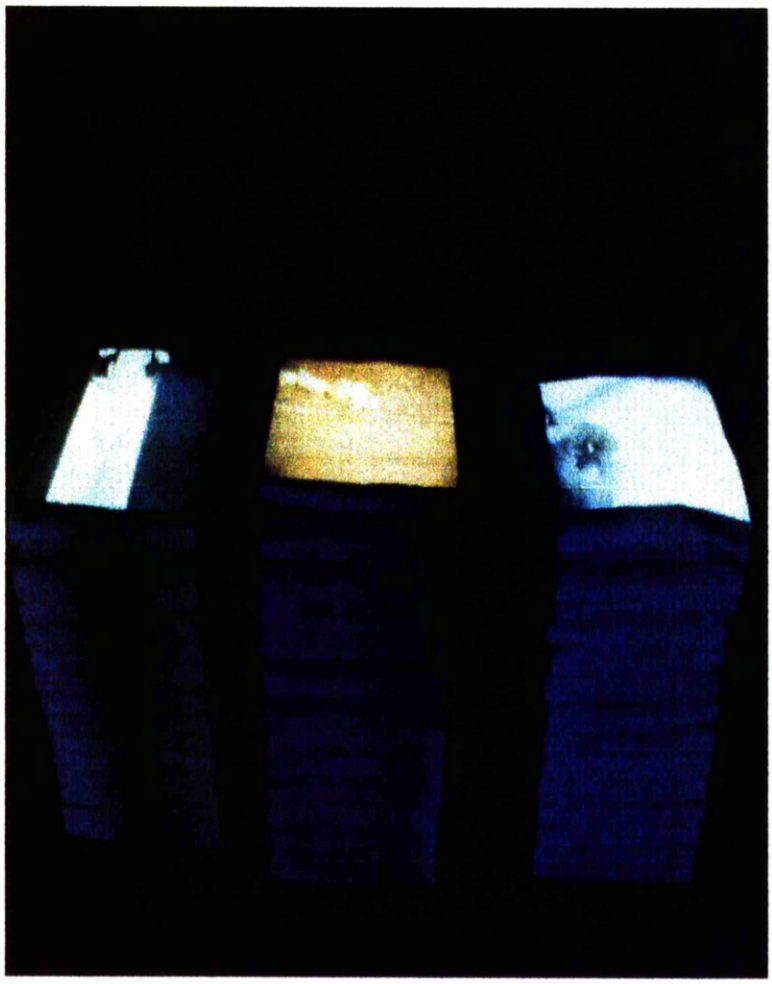
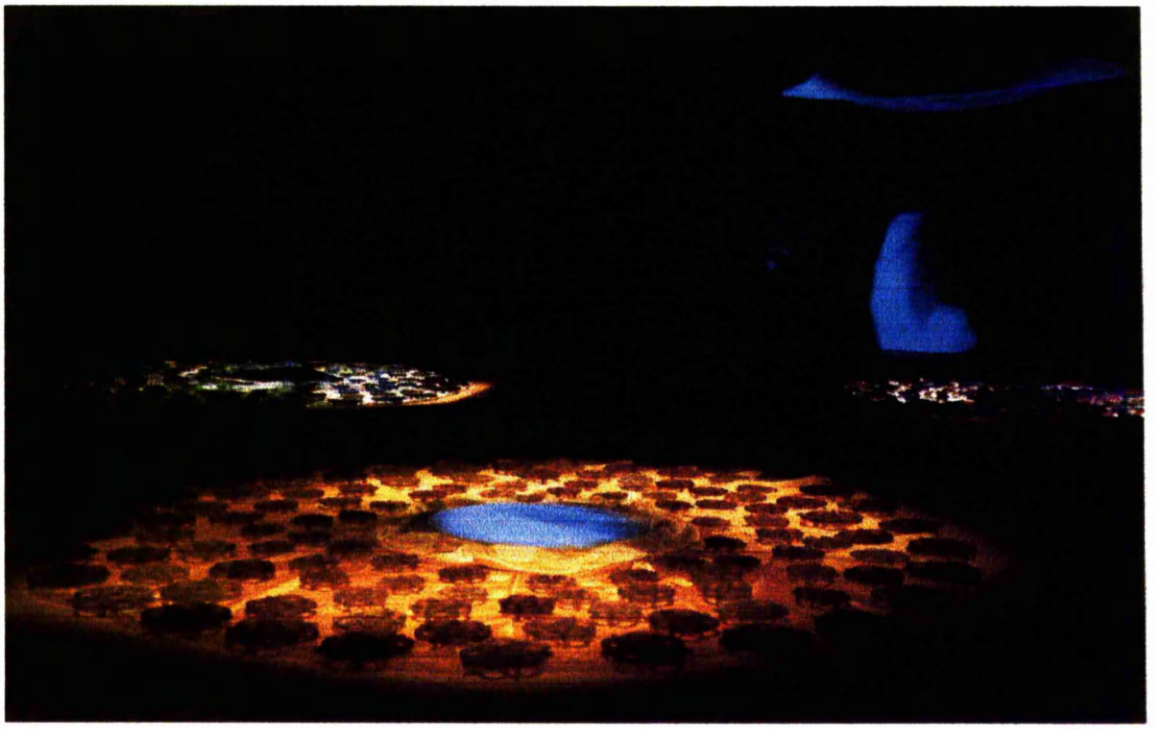


Figure.42 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Meanwhile, The Girls Were Playing* from the series *History of People who were not Heroes*, 1999/2000, 300 glass objects (*pâté-de-verre* Bull's Eye glass), embroidered silk organza, four laser disk video projections, stereo sound, dimensions variable, courtesy of MIT List Visual Arts Center, Boston, Massachusetts, U.S. Photo: Charles Mayer & John Horner.



Detail

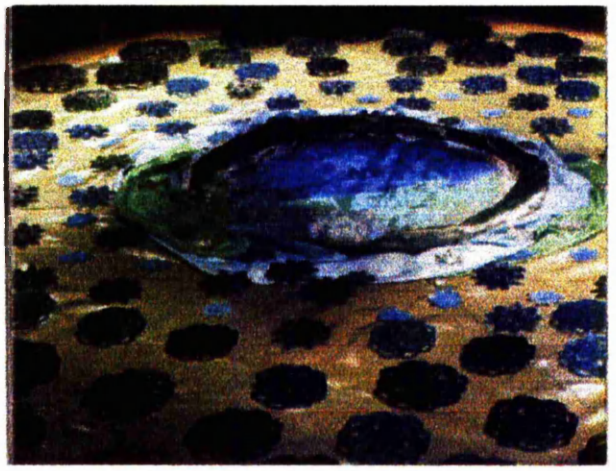


Figure.43 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *The Herbalist's Tools*, 1994, detail, mixed media installation, courtesy of the Addison Gallery of American Art, Andover, Massachusetts, U.S. Photo: Magdalena Campos-Pons.

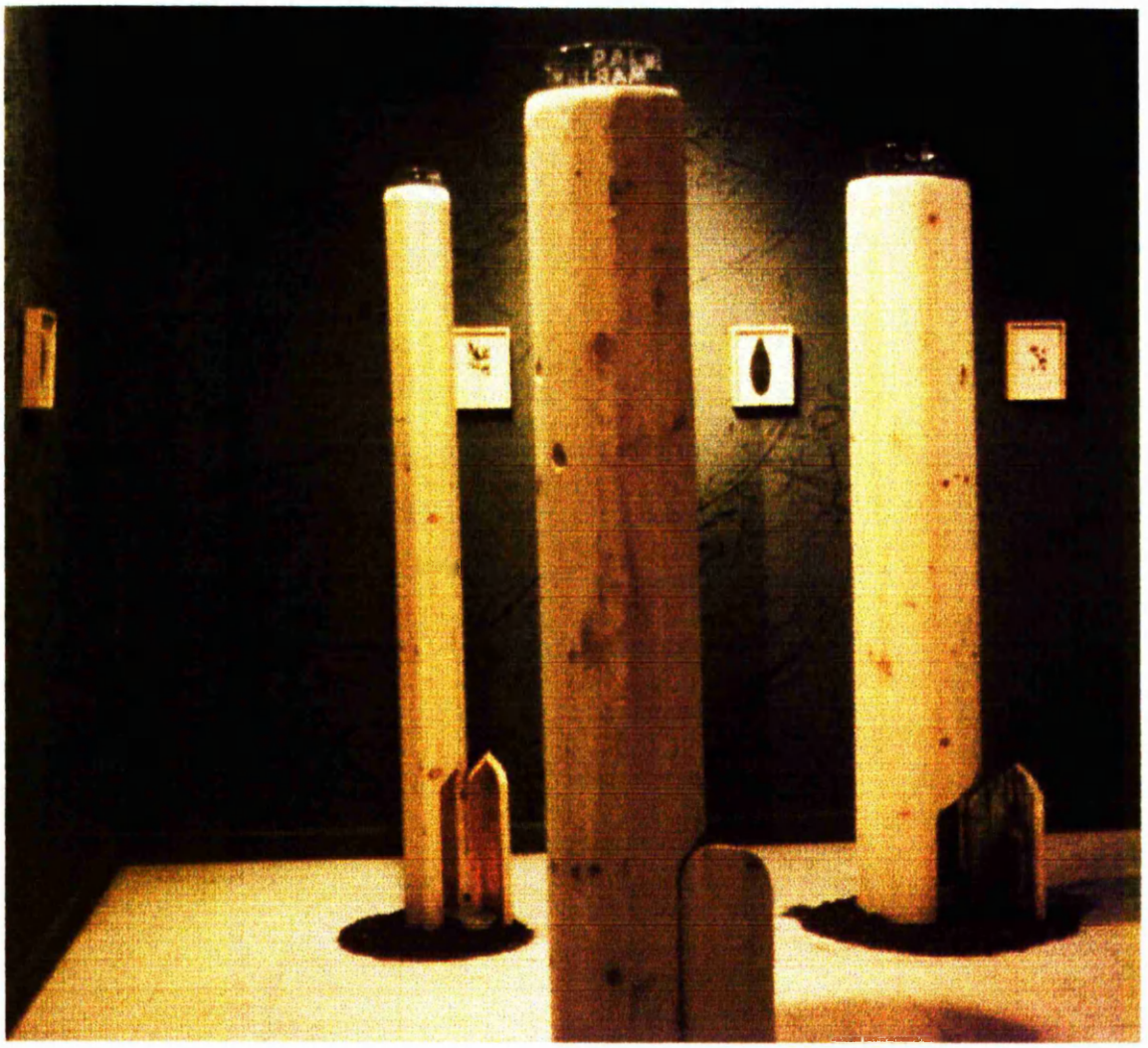


Figure.44 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Tra...*, 1991, mixed media installation, Collection of the artist. Photo: Magdalena Campos-Pons.

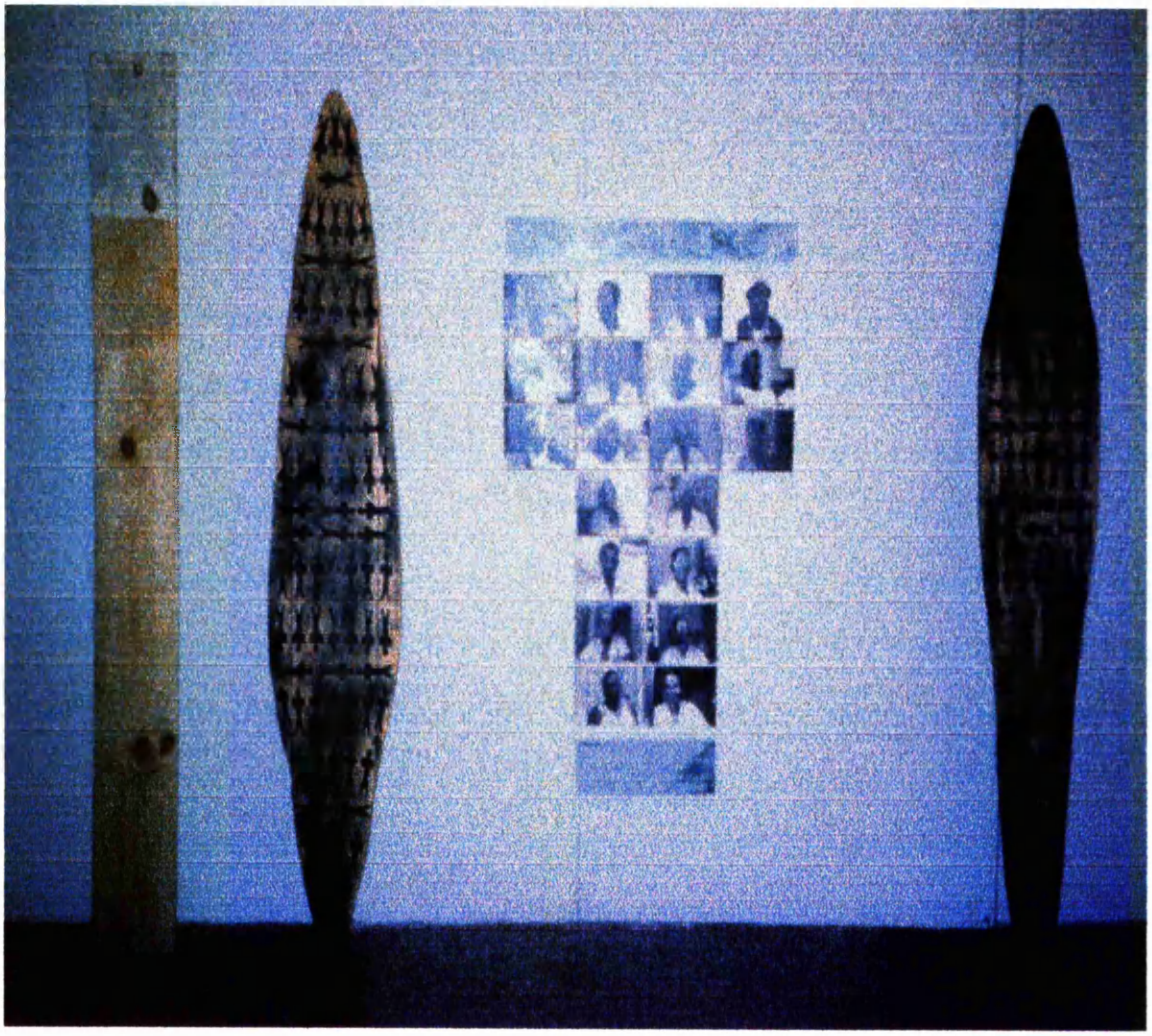


Figure.45 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *The Seven Powers Came by the Sea*, 1992, wood, glass, acrylic, soil on wood, metal frames, Collection of The Vancouver Art Gallery, BC, Canada. Photo: Magdalena Campos-Pons.

Figure.46 — Sandra Ramos, *Easy shopping*, 1989, etching, 70 x 50 cm, courtesy of the artist.

Figure.47 — Sandra Ramos, *Monte soy*, 1993, etching, 50 x 60 cm, Collection of Museo Nacional de Cuba, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba. Center for Cuban Studies, New York, U.S.

Figure.47a — Sandra Ramos, Y*en los montes*, 1993, etching, 50 x 60 cm, Collection of Museo Nacional de Cuba, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba. Center for Cuban Studies, New York, U.S.

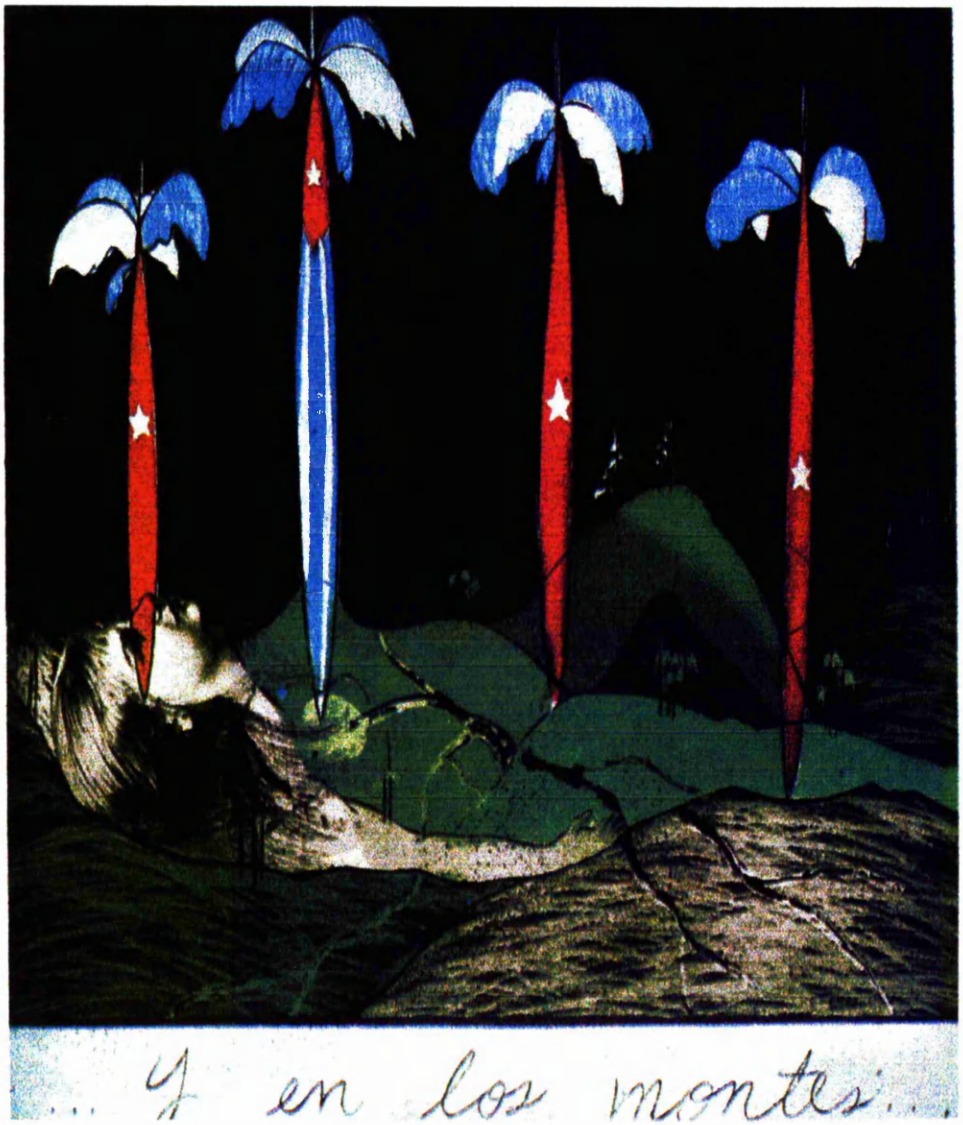


Figure.48 — Sandra Ramos, *La maldita circumstancia del agua por todas partes*, 1993, etching, 50 x 80 cm, Collection of Museo Nacional de Cuba, Palacio de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba. Ludwig Forum, Aachen, Germany. Grafik Museum Stiftung Schrainer, Bad Steben, Germany. Gallery GAN, Tokyo, Japan.

Figure.49 — Sandra Ramos, *La lección de historia*, 1996, etching, 50 x 80 cm, Private Collection, U.S. Der Bruke, Argentina.

Figure.50 — Sandra Ramos, *El fin de inocencia*, 1996, etching, 50 x 80 cm, Private Collection, U.S. Canvas Art World, The Netherlands. Der Bruke, Argentina.

Figure.51 — Sandra Ramos, *Los problemas del peso*, 1996, etching, 50 x 80 cm, Private Collection, U.S. Canvas Art World, The Netherlands. Der Bruke, Argentina.

Figure.52 — Sandra Ramos, *Recibimiento en la Havana*, 1996, etching, 50 x 80 cm, courtesy of the artist.

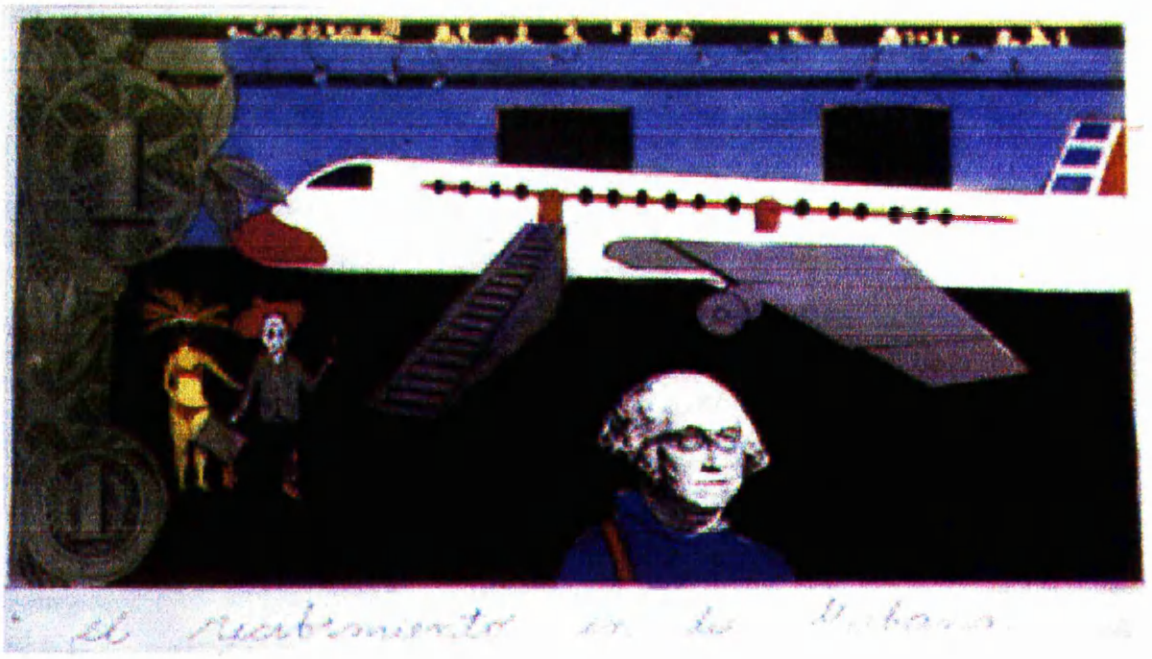


Figure.53 — Sandra Ramos, from the series *Estampas de Ukiyo-e tropical* {II}, 1992, etching, 70 x 50 cm, courtesy of the artist.

Figure.54 — Sandra Ramos, *El Fabuloso viaje de Santo Kyodei y la geisha Wakamara Daki por las Indias Occidentales {II}*, 1992, etching, 70 x 50 cm, courtesy of the artist.

Figure.55 — Sandra Ramos, *Migraciones II*, 1994, installation of 10 painted cases, 1000 cm, courtesy of the artist.

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Figure.56 — Sandra Ramos, *Criaturas de isla*, 1995, installation of five painted suitcases and objects, 400 x 600 x 500 cm, courtesy of the artist.

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Figure.57 — Sandra Ramos, *Los ciclos de agua* from the series *Inmersiones y Enterramientos*, 1999, installation: drawing and silkscreen on mirror paper, 1000 cm, courtesy of the artist. Exhibition: Immersions and Burials, Barbican Centre, London, UK, 1999. Inmersiones y Enterramientos, Galería Nina Menocal, Mexico D.F., 1999.

Detail of *Los ciclos del agua*: *"Veneno"* (*Poison*) 1999, installation: drawing on mirror paper, 44.5 x 64.5 cm.

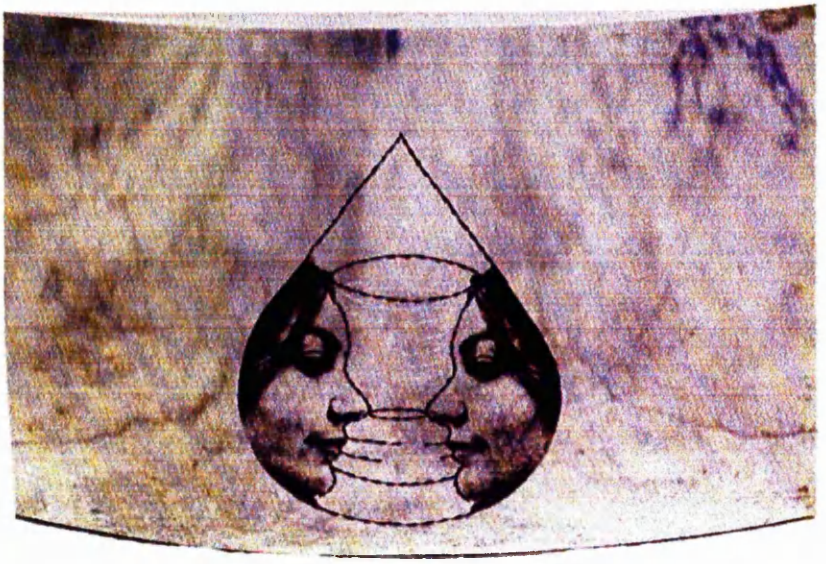


Figure.58 — Sandra Ramos, *¿Por qué se parecen la lluvia y el llanto?* from the series *Inmersiones y Enterramientos*, 1999, 100 tears of glass and water, 300 x 300 x 500 cm, courtesy of the artist.

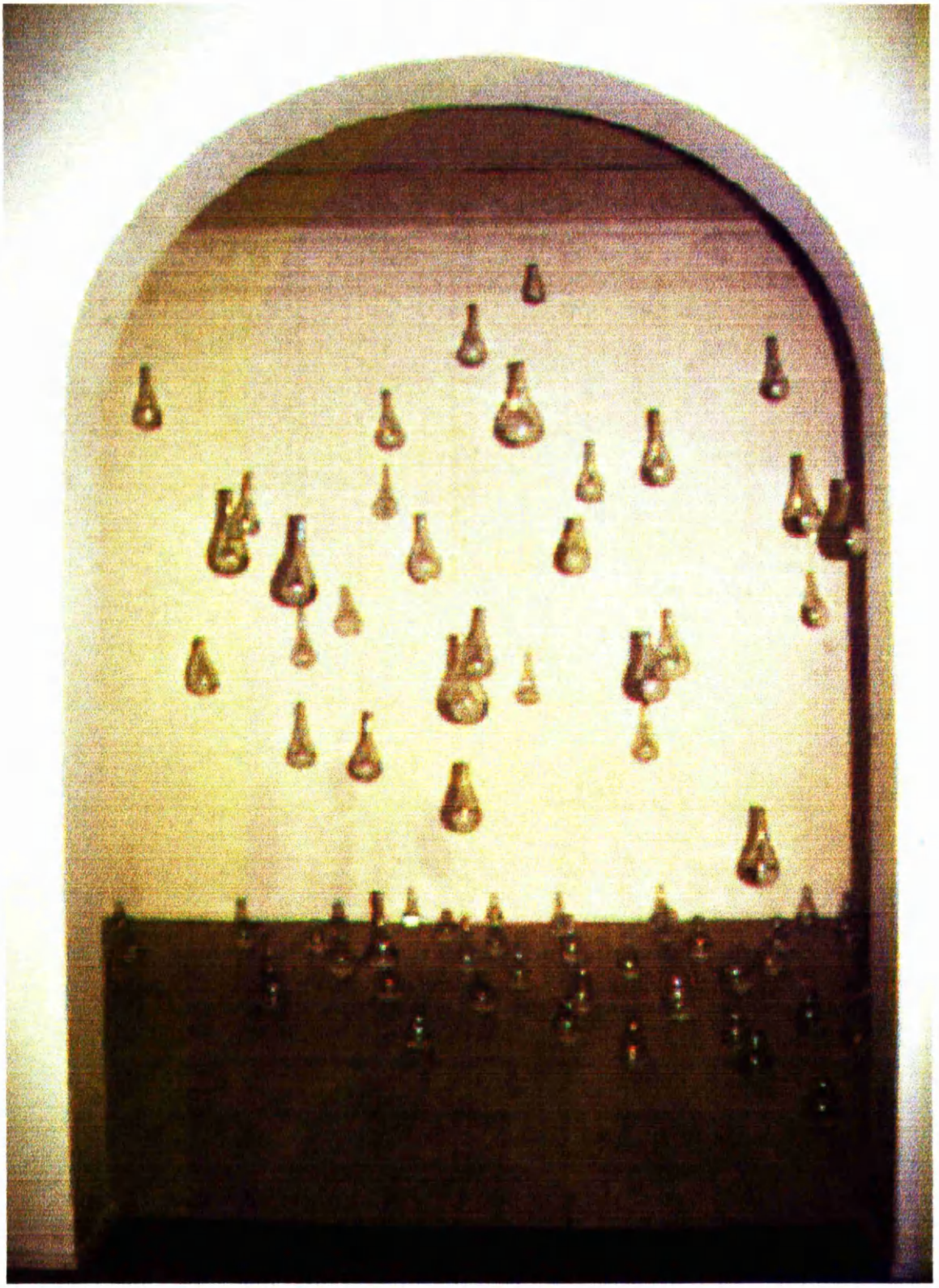


Figure.59 — Sandra Ramos, *Maquinaria para ahogar las penas* from the series *Inmersiones y Enterramientos*, 1999, interactive video installation: beverage container, TV set, video image, mirror paper, beverage, 180 x 130 x 250 cm, courtesy of the artist. Exhibition: Trabajando Pa'l Ingle, Barbican Centre, London, UK, 1999. Inmersiones y Enterramientos, Galería Nina Menocal, Mexico D.F., 1999.

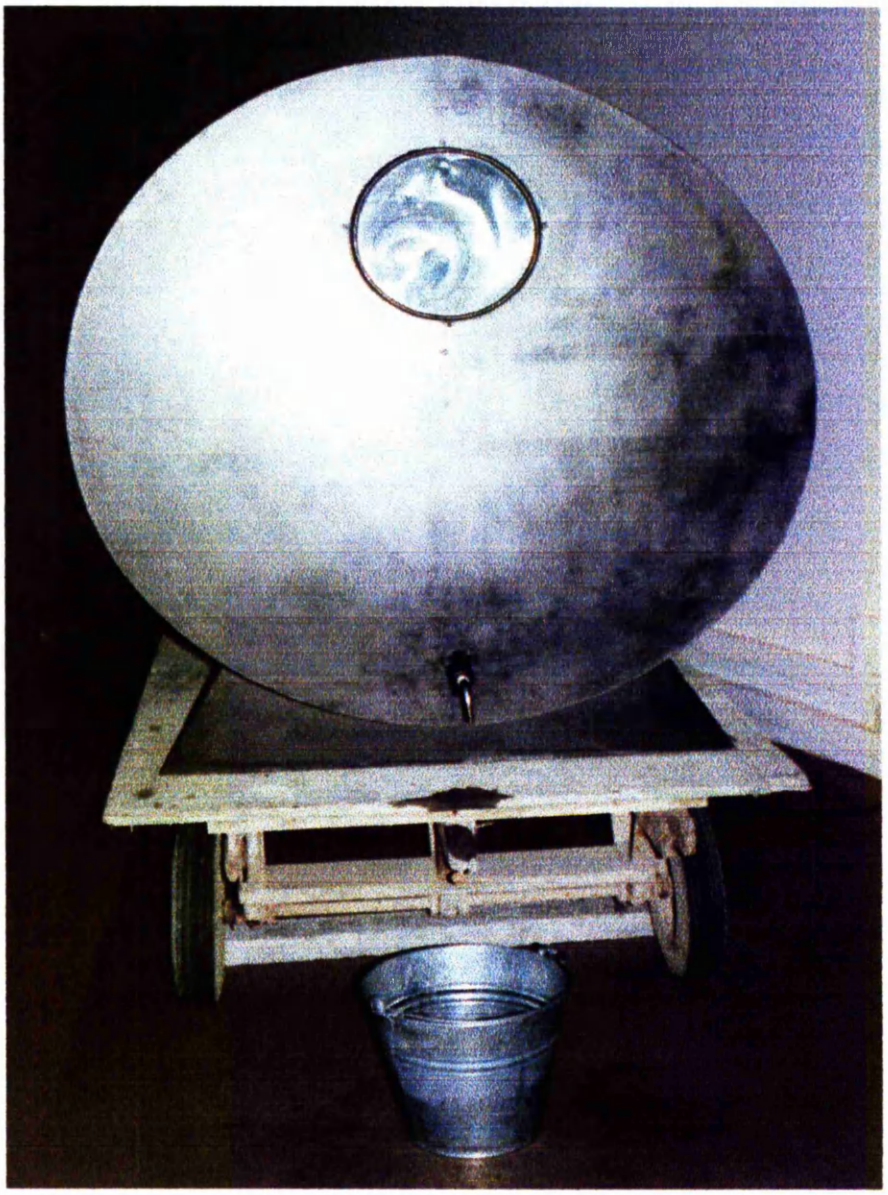


Figure.59 — Detail

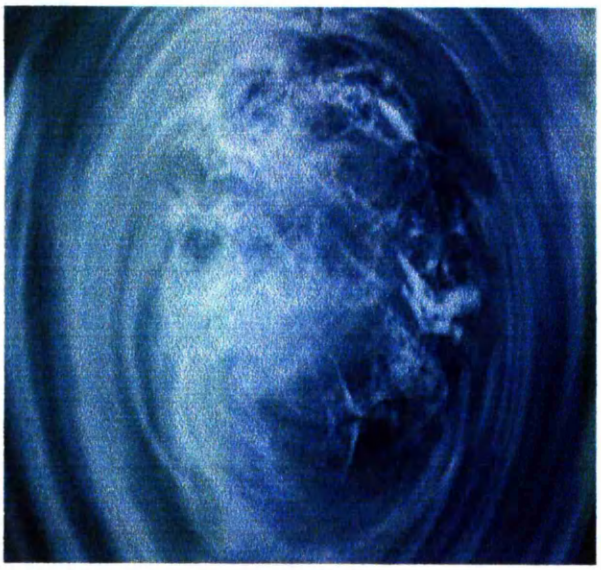


Figure.60 — Sandra Ramos, *Mi diaria vocación de suicida*, 1993, etching, 50 x 60 cm, Collection of Grafik Museum, Stiftung Schrainer, Bad Steben, Germany

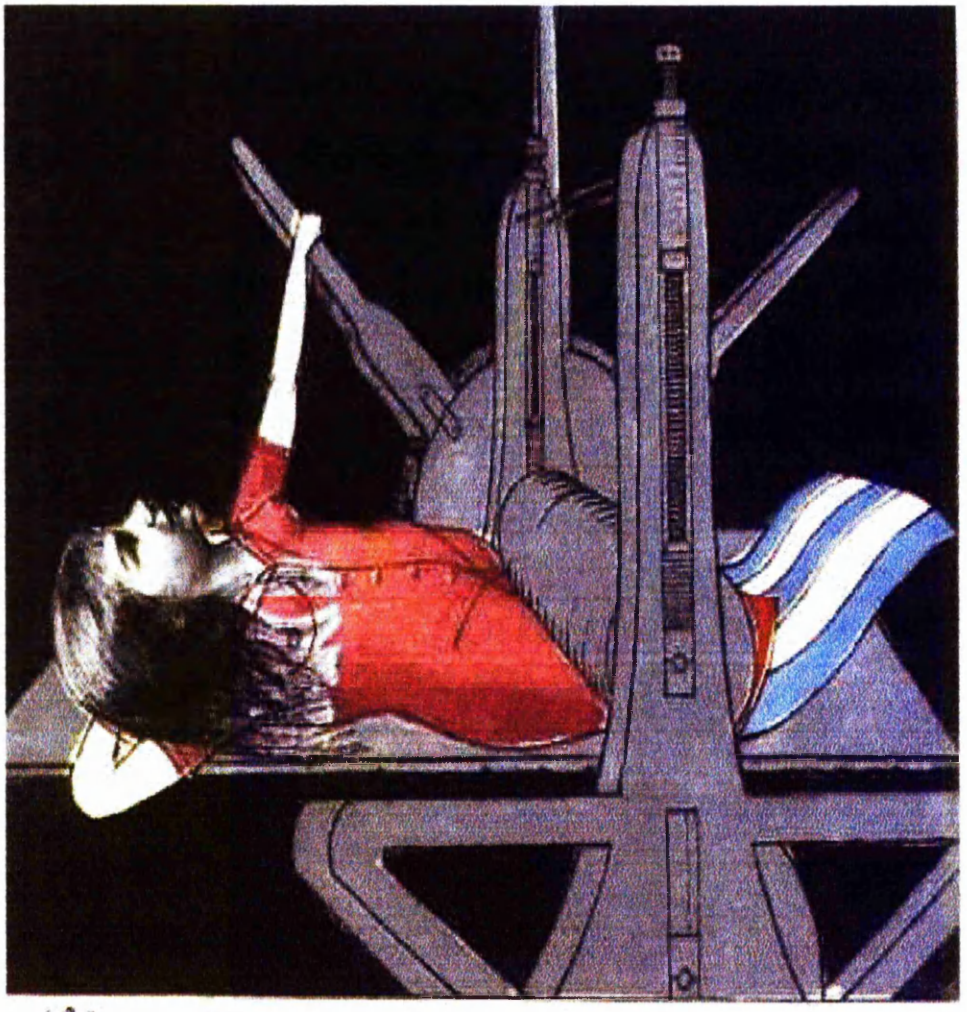


Figure.61 — Sandra Ramos, *Quizas hasta debe partirme en dos*, 1993, etching, 50 x 60 cm, Collection of Museo Nacional de Cuba, Havana, Cuba. Palacio de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba. Canvas Art World, The Netherlands. Casa de las Americas, Havana, Cuba.

Figure.62 — Sandra Ramos, *Alejandro*, 1993, etching, 50 x 40 cm, courtesy of the artist.

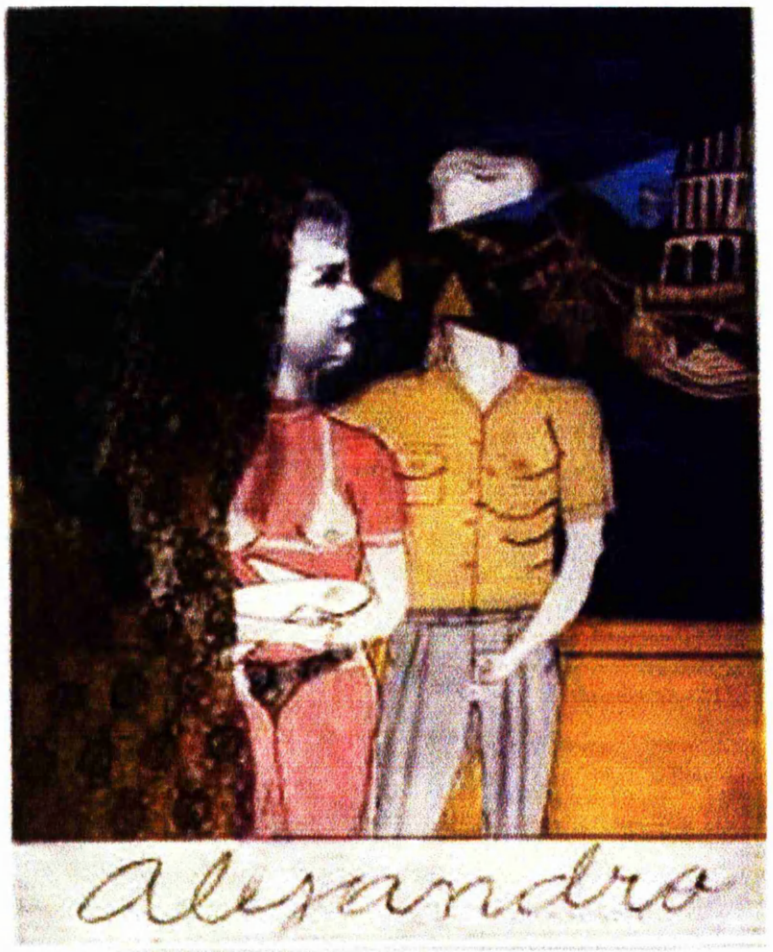


Figure.63 — Sandra Ramos, *El sueño del profeta*, 1993, etching, 40 x 50 cm, Private Collection, U.S.

Figure.64 — Sandra Ramos, *Seremos como el Che*, 1993, etching, 40 x 50 cm, courtesy of the artist.

Figure.65 — Tania Bruguera, *recreation of the work of Ana Mendieta*, 1987-1991, Collection of the artist. Photo: Luis Camnitzer.

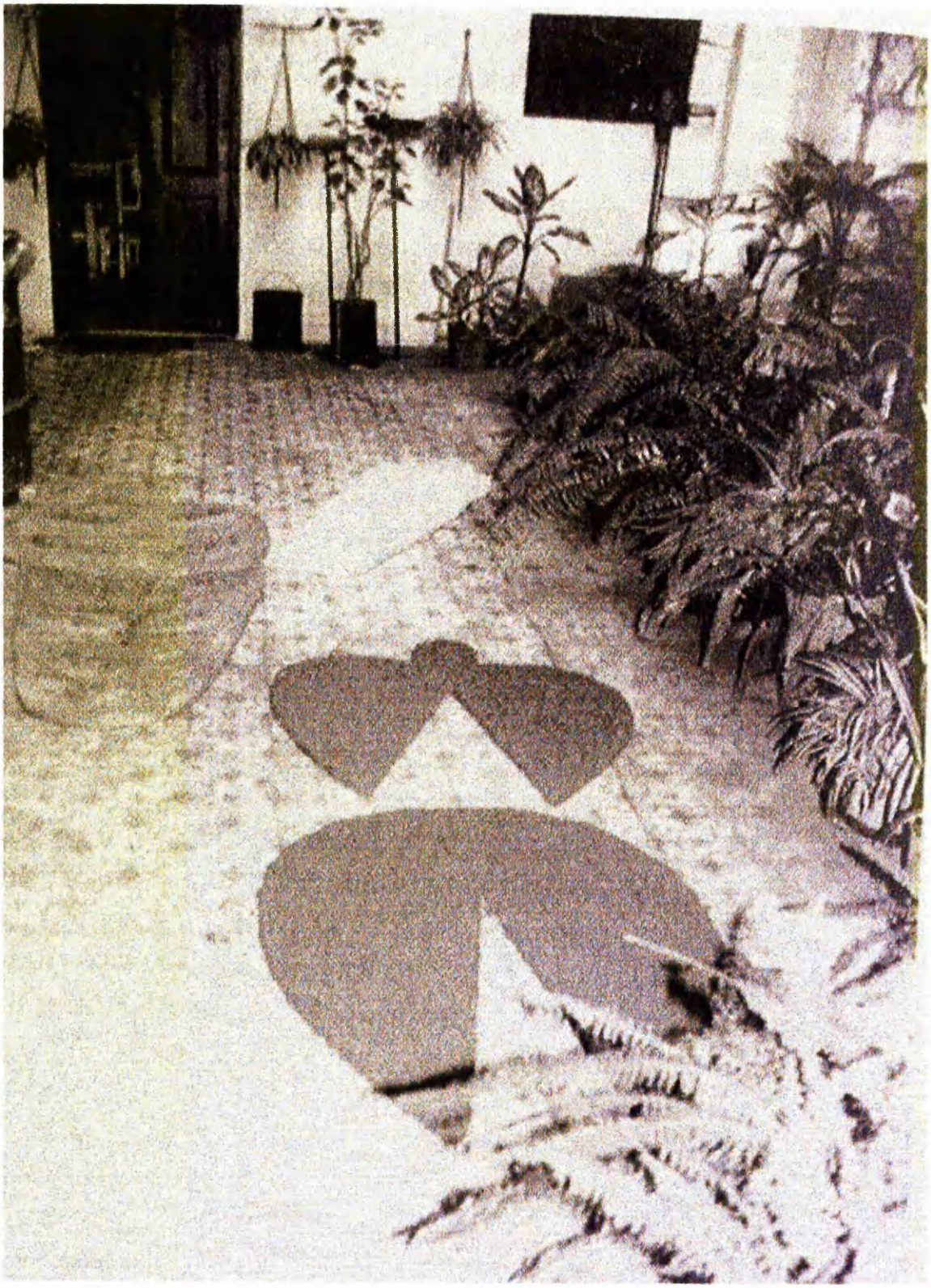


Figure.65a — Ana Mendieta, *Sin título* & *Ituba Cahubaba* from the series *Rupestrian Esculturas*, 1981-1982, photo-engravings on paper, 25,4 x 17,7 cm and 25,4 x 17,7 cm. Escaleras de Jaruco, Jaruco State Park, Havana, Cuba, courtesy of the Estate of the Artist and Galerie Lelong, New York, U.S.

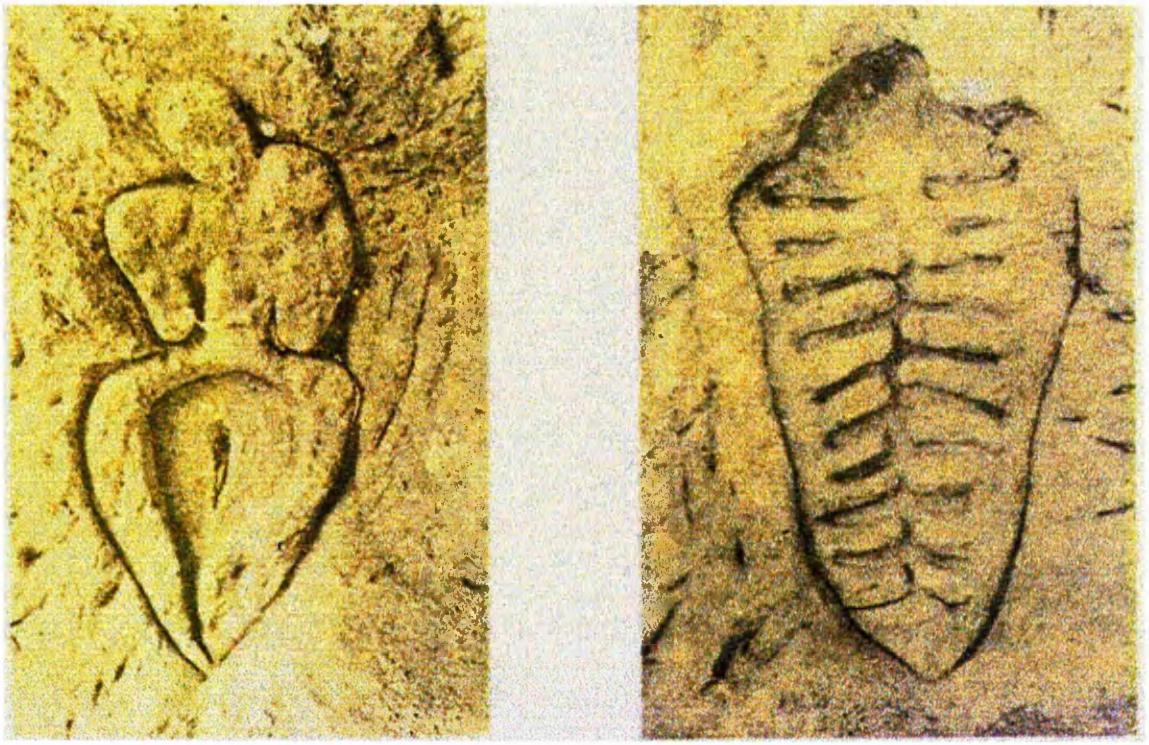


Figure.66 — Juan Francisco Elso Padilla, *Por América*, 1986, mixed media, 150 x 100 x 100 cm, Collection of Magali Lara, Mexico. Photo: Luis Camnitzer.

Figure.67 — Tania Bruguera, *Estadística* from the series *Memoria de la Postguerra*, 1996-1998, installation: hair on wood, earth, black paint, 360 x 150 cm, Collection of the artist. Photo: Marianne Greber.

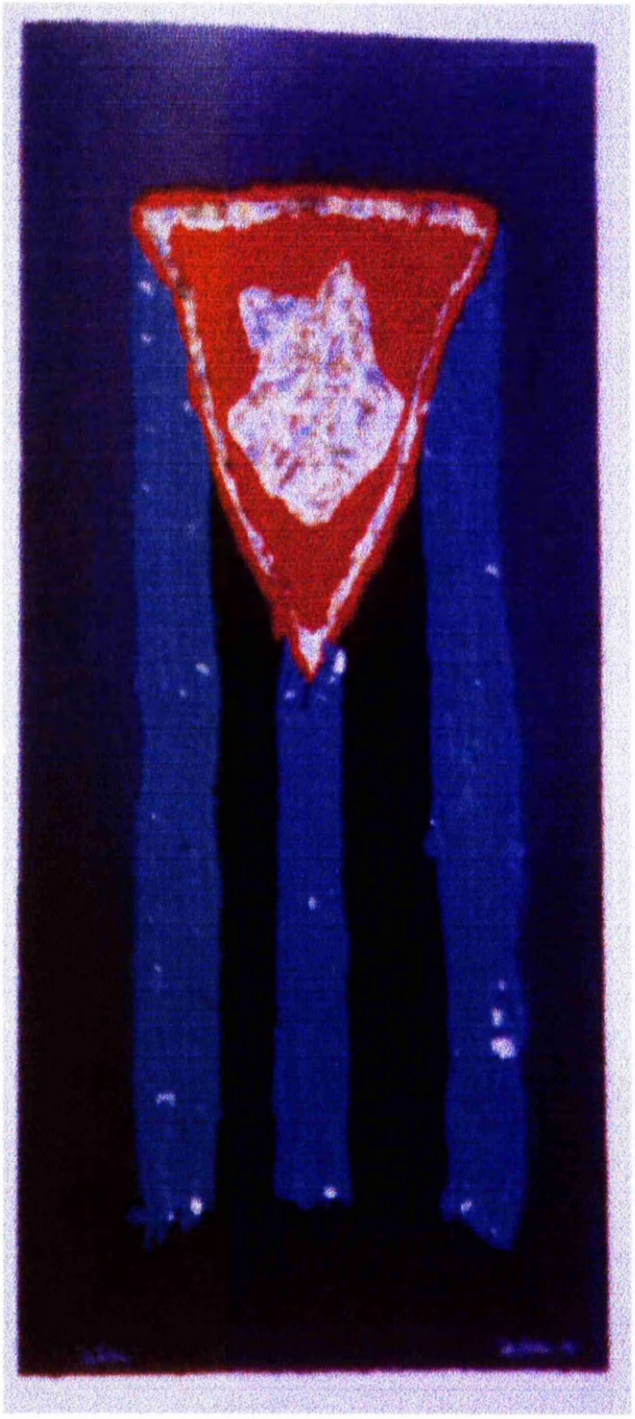
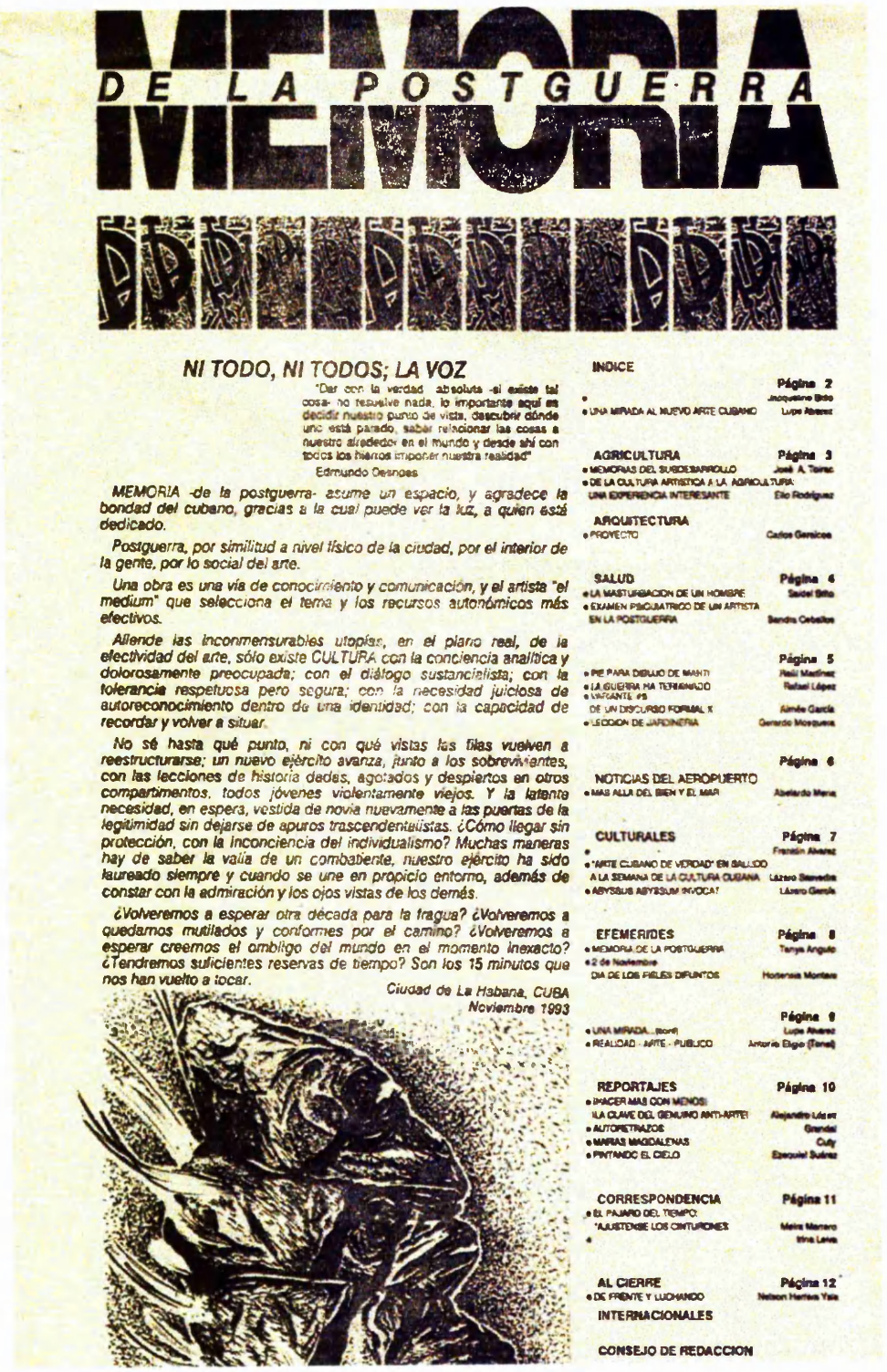


Figure.68 — Tania Bruguera, *Memoria de la Postguerra* from the series *Memoria de la Postguerra*, front cover, number 1, November 1993, paper, 34,5 x 22 cm, Collection of Jo-Ann van Eijck.



MEMORIA
DE LA POSTGUERRA
MEMORIA

NI TODO, NI TODOS; LA VOZ

"Dar con la verdad absoluta -si existe tal cosa- no resuelve nada, lo importante aquí es decidir nuestro punto de vista, descubrir dónde uno está parado, saber relacionar las cosas a nuestro alrededor en el mundo y desde ahí con todos los hierros imponer nuestra realidad"

Edmundo Desnoes

MEMORIA -de la postguerra- asume un espacio, y agradece la bondad del cubano, gracias a la cual puede ver la luz, a quien está dedicado.

Postguerra, por similitud a nivel físico de la ciudad, por el interior de la gente, por lo social del arte.

Una obra es una vía de conocimiento y comunicación, y el artista "el medium" que selecciona el tema y los recursos autonómicos más efectivos.

Allende las inconmensurables utopías, en el plano real, de la efectividad del arte, sólo existe CULTURA con la conciencia analítica y dolorosamente preocupada; con el diálogo sustancialista; con la tolerancia respetuosa pero segura; con la necesidad juiciosa de autoreconocimiento dentro de una identidad; con la capacidad de recordar y volver a situar.

No sé hasta qué punto, ni con qué vistas las filas vuelven a reestructurarse; un nuevo ejército avanza, junto a los sobrevivientes, con las lecciones de historia dadas, agotados y despiertos en otros compartimentos, todos jóvenes violentamente viejos. Y la latente necesidad, en espera, vestida de novia nuevamente a las puertas de la legitimidad sin dejarse de apuros trascendentalistas. ¿Cómo llegar sin protección, con la inconciencia del individualismo? Muchas maneras hay de saber la valía de un combatiente, nuestro ejército ha sido laureado siempre y cuando se une en propicio entorno, además de constar con la admiración y los ojos vistas de los demás.

¿Volveremos a esperar otra década para la fragua? ¿Volveremos a quedamos mutilados y conformes por el camino? ¿Volveremos a esperar creemos el ombligo del mundo en el momento inexacto? ¿Tendremos suficientes reservas de tiempo? Son los 15 minutos que nos han vuelto a tocar.

Ciudad de La Habana, CUBA
Noviembre 1993

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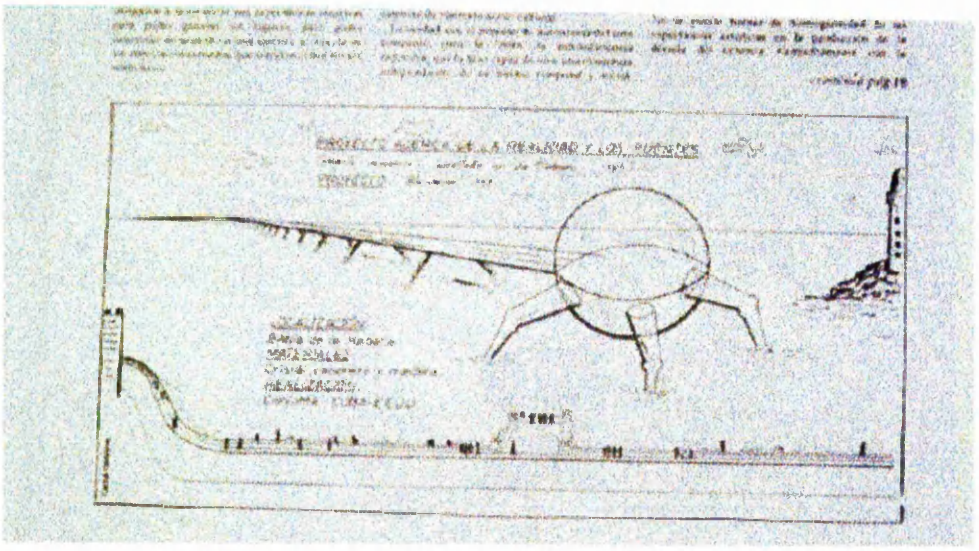
Figure.68a — Details from *Memoria de la Postguerra* from the series *Memoria de la Postguerra*, number 2, June 1994, paper, 34,5 x 22 cm, Collection of Eugenio Valdés Figueroa. Photos: Jo-Ann van Eijck.

I



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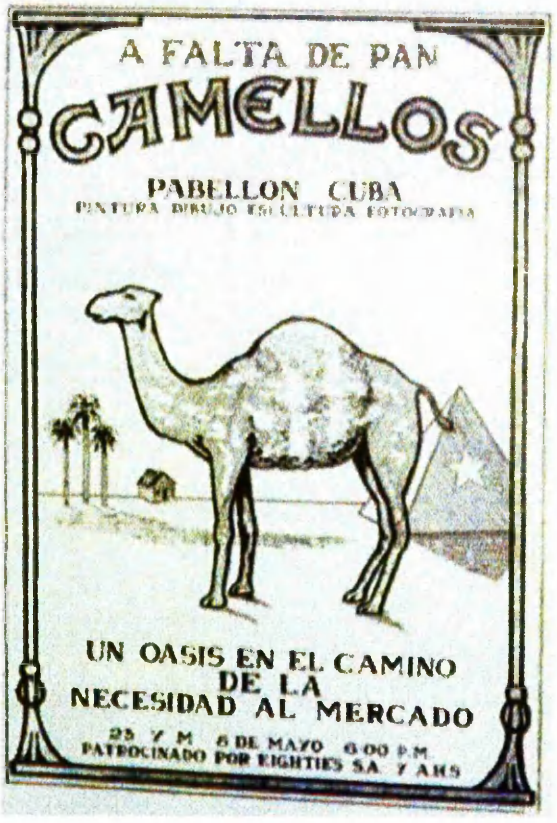

III

Figure.68a — Details

IV

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VI

VII

Figure.68a — Detail

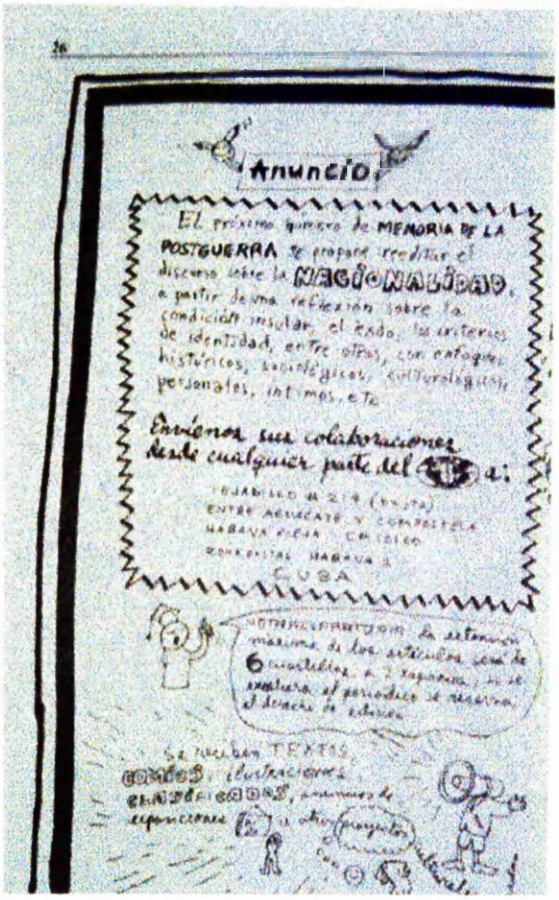


Figure.69 — Tania Bruguera, *El Peso de Culpa*, 1997, performance at Museo de Bellas Artes, Caracas, Venezuela, courtesy of the artist.

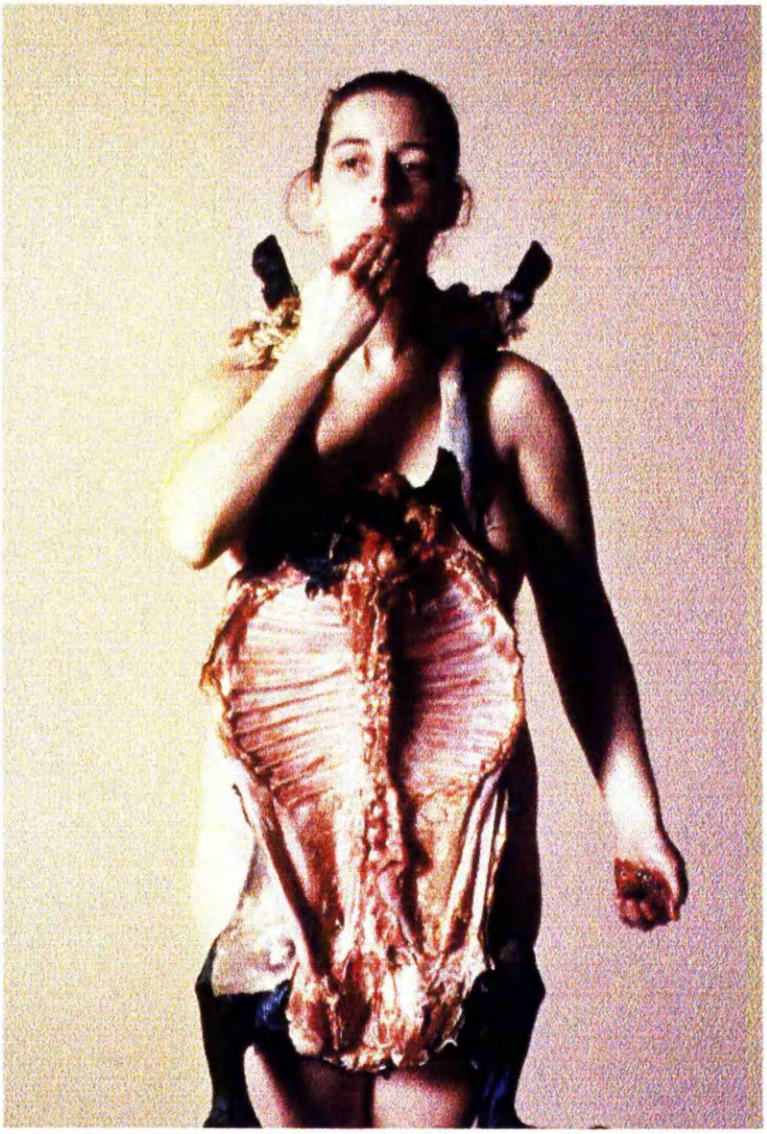


Figure.70 — Tania Bruguera, "*Absolución*" from the series *Dédalo o el Imperio de Salvación*, 1996, metal, paper, material, Collection of the Centro Provincial de Artes Plásticas y Diseño, Havana, Cuba.

Figure.70a — "*Ilusión*" from the series *Dédalo o el Imperio de Salvación*, 1995, metal, rubber, material, Collection of the Museo de Bellas Artes, Havana, Cuba.

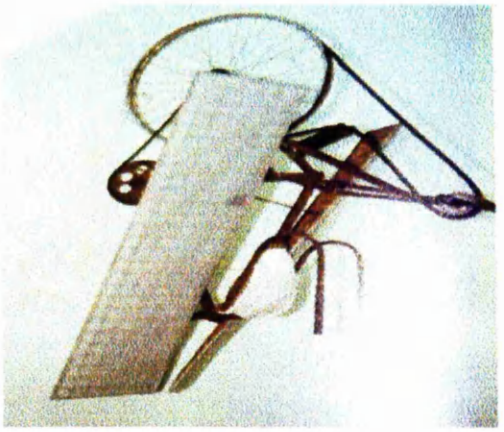


Figure.70b — Tania Bruguera wearing "*Absolución*".

Figure.71 — Tania Bruguera, *Miedo*, 1994, performance for 5th Havana Biennial, courtesy of Centro Wifredo Lam, Havana, Cuba.

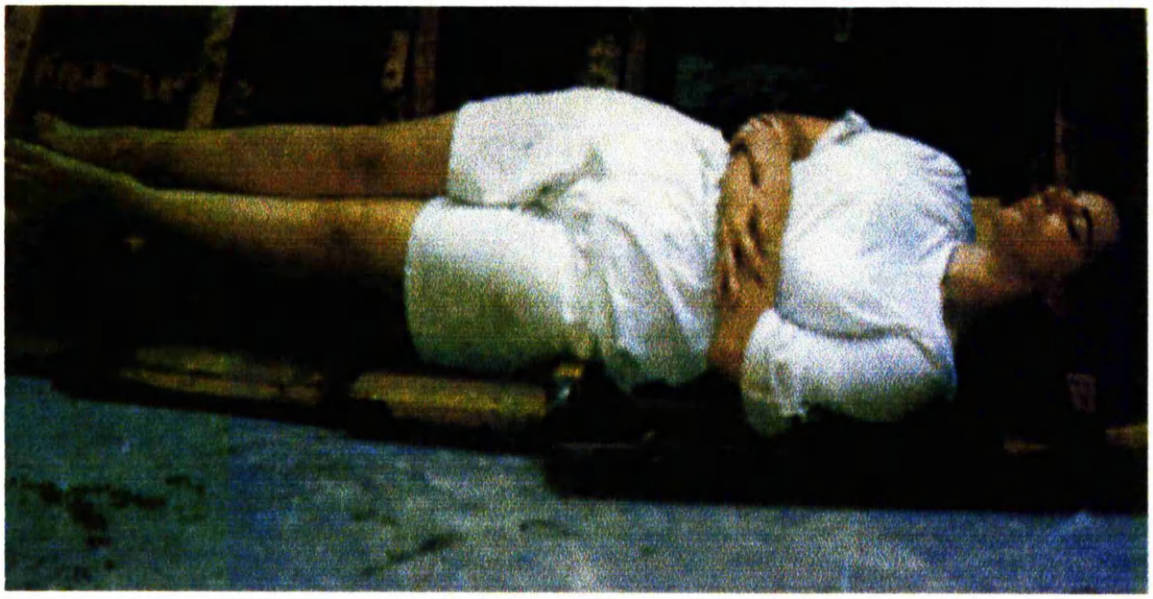
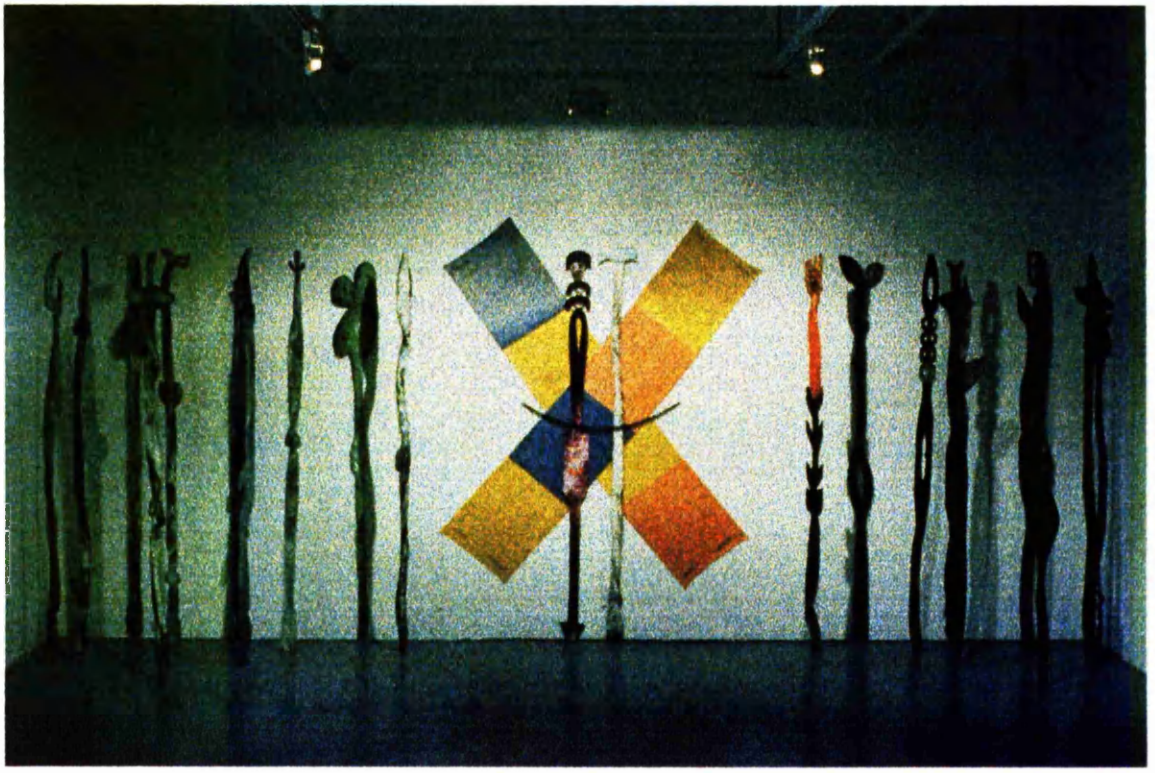


Figure.72 — Sandra Ramos, *Buzos* from the series *Inmersiones y Enterramientos*, 1999, garbage container, TV set and video image, garbage, courtesy of the artist. Exhibition: Trabajando Pa'l Ingle. Barbican Centre, London, UK, 1999. Inmersiones y Enterramientos, Galería Nina Menocal, Mexico D.F., 1999.

Detail

Figure.73 — Magdalena Campos-Pons, *Hablando de árboles, pino negro, pino blanco, especie endémica*, 1990, mixed media installation, courtesy of the artist. Photo: Magdalena Campos-Pons.



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Glossary

Abakuá — Even in current times, the *Abakuá* society constitutes a cultural phenomenon that has no parallel anywhere in the Americas and it represents the only recreation or reconstitution of the African secret leopard society in the entire African Diaspora. The word *Abakuá* is the creolisation of the term by which the Ejagham cultural grouping were designated in Cuba, *Abakpa*.

Aché/Ashé — Life force or power of the *orisha*; divine authority.

Anaforuanas — Written signs and symbols of the *Abakuá* society — *firmas, signos and gandos.*

Arará — Based on beliefs stemming from the Fon of the former kingdom of ancient Dahomey in West Africa. In Cuba, numerous subgroups with distinct brotherhoods and institutional identities appeared. The pantheon of *Fodduces* is structured like *Yoruba orishas* and the deities have analogous roles and characteristics.

BakongolKongo — Unlike the *Yoruba*, the *BaKongo* cultural groupings from Central Africa do not have a pantheon of deities, but they possess a complex system of sacred medicines as an integral component of their religious practice.

Balseros — The Cubans who attempt to leave Cuba, for the U.S. mostly, by covert means, often on handmade rafts.

Bembes — Celebrations for the *orishas* in *Santería*.

Collares de Mazo — Elaborately beaded necklaces used in *Yoruba* divinations and Atlantic altar traditions and initiation ceremonies

Costumbrista — The literature of manners and the typical customs of a country or region.

Ebbos — Offerings made to the *orishas*.

Famba — Sacred *Abakuá* temple space.

Güiro — Cuban word for any type of calabash.

Ila'orisha Ilya'orisha — *Santería* priestess.

Ireme — masked figures in *Abakuá* ceremonial practices.

Iyawó pl. ***Iyawós/Iyawoses*** — *Santería* devotees/initiates.

Lucumí — The substantial number of peoples brought to Cuba from Nigeria, the descendants of *Ewe* and *Fon* cultural groupings, became known as the *Lucumí* nation in Cuba, as the core identity for *Yoruba*-derived groupings in their new Cuban context.

Mayombero — *Palo Monte* dignitary.

Mestizaje — Miscegenation that refers to the racial and cultural mix of European, Indian and African descendants that is typical of Latin American societies.

Mulato/a — A person of mixed parentage/race.

Ñáñigo — *Abakuá* practitioner.

Ngangas — Spiritually charged metal or clay receptacles or cauldrons used in *Palo Monte* that are the centre of magical-religious forces and are meant to house the attributes of the spirits and secret spells of *mayomberos/paleros*. In *Palo Monte*, many elements are kept inside these pots, representing a synthesis of the cosmos with a spirit inside of it as a depository for energy force.

Ngbe/Ekpé — The West African predecessor to the Afro-Cuban *Abakuá* society, *Ngbe* was the hierarchical secret male-only leopard society, believed to have originated in southeastern Nigeria among the Ejagham people. The secrets of *Ngbe* were expressed and coded through symbolic form and formulaic representations, such as signs, gestures, dance, costumes, ritual objects and various ceremonies. There was also a hermetic and esoteric language called *Nsibidi*, a unique ideographic writing system that represented ideas and included signs that embodied many powers. Esoteric knowledge was learned through initiation into various grades that had their own costumes, dances and secret knowledge attached to them. Similarity in language and culture and the migration of many different cultural groups in this region of West Africa led to the spread of the society and it became known as *Ekpe*. It united the cultural groups that adopted it along the trade routes by common ritual experience and the secret language of *Nsibidi*. In Cuba, *Ekpe* became known as the *Abakuá* society and *Nsibidi* became known as *anaforuanas*.

Nkisi Nkonde — Objects used in Central African societies in which resides an incomprehensible power for good or ill. These fabricated objects often include metal and nails inserted into them as well as specific rituals and potions to 'activate' them. They are things that can be invoked to produce the desired effects - they have a will of their own.

Oriki — *Yoruba* praise poetry.

Orishas — The pantheon of *Yoruba*-derived deities with specific characteristics, colours, dances, and objects associated with each of them, in conjunction with stones, possession, music, and rituals.

Otá pl. ***Otán*** — Stones in which the *Orishas* are consecrated and materialised in *Yoruba* and *Santería* practices.

Palo Monte — Many *Kongo* descendants were brought to Cuba and *Palo Monte* was the form that *Kongo*-derived religious practice took in Cuba. It is also known as *Regla de Palo*, *Palo*, *Conga*, *Regla Conga*, and has variants known as *Mayombe*, *Biriyumba*, *Quirimbaya*. As with *Kongo* religious practice, *Palo Monte* practices focus on sustaining life in this world by using the forces, beings, and things present in the universe for the

benefit of humans. There are also elements of magic and witchcraft, manipulating the forces of nature, which take the form of charms, amulets, signs and fetish/medicine bundles. There is a complex system of sign language in the form of cosmograms.

Palero — *Palo Monte* priest/practitioner.

Picuo — A Cuban term that refers to the corny extravagance of vernacular decoration - like Kitsch.

Santería — Afro-Cuban religion dominated by West African *Yoruba* ideals, traditions and language. African traditions were creatively reworked in Cuba, and *Santería* is a mixture of predominantly *Yoruba*-derived religious practices, combined with elements of traditional and folk Catholicism and Spiritism. Because during the formation of *Santería* in Cuba, the Catholic churches' enforced repression of African deities led to associations being made between Catholic saints and *Yoruba orishas* and syncretism took place, to mask the covert worship of the *Yoruba*-derived pantheon of *orishas*. *Santería* is also known as *Regla de Ocha*, *Ocha* and *Regla de Ifá* in Cuba

Santero — *Santería* priest/practitioner.

Sopera — Ceramic water filled tureens used as containers to house the essence of the *Orishas*.